

# Life and Other Conversations

Adele Rankin — Portfolio

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## **Preface**

It was important to me to do something new this year.

I've been working on the same novel since 2020 and running a Dungeons and Dragons campaign in the same world since 2022. The two projects are both wonderful creative outlets that I love with my whole heart, but it was time to remember that I could write different stories. And I did. Throughout the course of this school year, I've written about vampires, best friends, estranged siblings, weddings, Victorian England, enthralling statues, summer camp in the eighties — and that's just counting what the portfolio consists of.

Maybe not every story here has been revised to its full potential yet. Maybe I'm still struggling with my ability to leave a story with a satisfactory ending. But I think the biggest thing that I need to learn and keep learning about writing is that not everything has to be perfect the first time around. Or the second. Or maybe even the third. I'm happy to have completed something, even if it's not the most perfect.

I think it's important to write for fun and to practice your craft, even when it's not on a project that's the center of your focus. I'm glad to have done that this year.

## **In Case of Wedding**

Friends, family — those are kind of the same thing in some cases...you get what I mean. And also, random celebrities that I invited just for the bit of it. Welcome to my wedding.

Yes, I know. I know what you're thinking. They're standing up here alone and starting the ceremony. Aren't there normally two people at a wedding? Isn't there normally an officiant? Is this secretly someone else's wedding? You never shut the fuck up about being ordained.

I've always liked the idea of having a wedding. I don't really see why weddings are just for couples. I get that it's meant to be a celebration of love, but also like if you go back to historical roots I feel like it might also be a political or financial thing? I didn't do any research, I really should have for this speech. I don't know, the sacredness of weddings kind of feels...outdated, and like something people use to be homophobic.

I mean, to my married or planning to someday be married loved ones in the audience, I am in no way discounting your experience. Hell, I've ordained a few of your weddings. I'll do more! The point is, I'm doing my own thing. Although I think it's important for me to make the distinction that I am not marrying myself. I think that was a feminist trend a while back, and also it was an episode of Glee which I regrettably did watch. That horrid tracksuit wedding dress haunts me. Who thought that was a good idea? Who thought Glee was a good idea? I digress. The point here is that I think getting married to yourself is kind of the wrong thing for me. Like yeah, weddings are a celebration of love, right? And I mean, I love myself. But what does that even have to do with marriage? I love all of you that are here. Except for the random celebrities that I invited for the bit, I'm not parasocial or anything. I'm a tiny bit parasocial. Anyway, I love you all. But I'm not going to marry any of you, even for tax benefits. And yes, for the purpose of

this joke, you have to pretend I know what a tax benefit is. I don't want to get married. I just want to have a wedding.

Weddings are this big special day that's all about you, which I'm not saying in a "oh, nobody pays attention to me" way. I'm not over here languishing in loneliness, I have a robust social calendar. But at weddings, you get the pretty dress. I had the whole "trying on wedding dresses in thrift stores" phase, which I'm kind of still in, because sometimes it's fun to put on a pretty dress for the bit. You get to go to the nice location, which is a smaller deal because I didn't super want to spend a lot of money on the nicest place, so now we're just in a fine place that I could scam my way into getting for cheap. And you get to make your friends sword fight each other, and try to convince brands to send you free things, and invite random celebrities, and...so when you're like, ten and you're having a sleepover, because you still do sleepovers — I mean, I still kind of do sleepovers, because I just invite myself to people's houses and crash on their couch when it gets late. The point is, at this sleepover, it's late, and you're not used to being up that late, because you're in elementary school, even though it's probably only midnight, which is before you ever go to bed nowadays at thirty. So you're talking about your future weddings with your best friend and they tell you that they're going to bring a poison apple to your wedding to reenact the plot of Sleeping Beauty. Which, first of all, that's Snow White, not Sleeping Beauty. Although, I'd honestly rather have a poison apple than prick my finger. I don't have my younger self's fear of needles, but I prefer to avoid them when I can. But the poison apple that your best friend wants to bring to your wedding is a funny bit. So the two of you keep talking about it for the next ten years. But when you're twenty, you realize that there isn't going to be a wedding. Because you're aromantic. But you're also a fucking closer.

A fake wedding, that's pretty fun, right? And then the poison apple bit finally has a satisfying conclusion. And you have lots of friends who are actors, so one of them can for sure pretend to be marrying you. But it starts to kind of bug you.

Media, society, everything is so focused on romance. And I love a good love story. Anyone can tell you that I've got a framed *Pride and Prejudice* poster on my wall, that when characters in shows have cute romantic moments I'll lose my mind just as much as everyone else does, and that the real life couples I know are really incredible together, and their love for each other makes me really happy. But the point is, despite my love for all that, there aren't very many aromantic characters for me to love. There's all my loved ones who are either happily coupled up or want to be someday. And then oh right, there's also me. And I don't do that. I don't want to do that, but sometimes it just feels like everyone has a person. And I don't have a person. In the conventional, matched set way. I've got a lot of people. Four best friends who are like my second family. Incredible and loving parents. A brother who's almost figured out how to be good at replying to my texts. So many wonderful people who have changed my life by being in it. All of you, who showed up to hear me make a stupid speech and go to a theoretically fun party where I make everybody dance and do karaoke. Also, don't eat the apples. I feel like that might go without saying? That's part of the point of this wedding.

So I know. I'm aromantic. That doesn't mean I don't still want a wedding dress and a wedding reception and a wedding apple. And I want to be okay with being aromantic. Which I think I am. I hope I am. And that's the point. This is meant to be a sweet moment, where we acknowledge how much I love...myself, I guess. And I do. It's meant to be a devotion. And I know what I'm devoted to. It's love, my love for myself, and my love for all of you.

But there's still the question. Why does this matter so much to you? Why do you have to get so defensive, claim you can still have a wedding even if you're not even sure you care about that anymore? Why do you want to be normal? This isn't the speech anymore, this is me asking you. Being aromantic isn't the only thing that matters. In fact, it tends to steamroll so many other things about you, this thing where you can finally explain what's been going on with you. You did it when you realized you were non-binary, when you discovered you were neurodivergent. You let these things become steamrollers, because you were so focused on being able to say "this is why, this is the explanation" when it's not like it ever really hurt you too bad to not have it in the first place. You felt different. You still feel different, but now you know why. Don't shove it in everyone's faces. Don't make it the source of all your problems. Don't have a wedding.

Everyone still loves you even if your life isn't what you thought it would be. Everyone loves you because you have stopped trying to shove everything into boxes it doesn't fit in. You don't have to explain everything, to anticipate every storyline and plot beat. You just have to pay attention, to do what makes you happy. So what if your parents never believe you or understand what you mean by aromantic? So what if your friends still struggle to figure out exactly what's going on with you sometimes? So what if people ask you out and you don't realize? None of this is the end of the world. All of it works out, somehow, someday.

You can say all this at your wedding. Hell, you can have the wedding. Or you can improvise. You can change with the seasons, with the world you are and exist in. You can be the bringer of the poison apple, the witch instead of the princess.

You're never going to get married. You're never going to have a wedding.

You're still going to be happy.

## **Evie & Tommy**

Tommy's losing badly in Mario Kart when the door opens, slamming against the wall. Evie makes it two steps across the room before collapsing face first onto Tommy's bed. He doesn't pause the game, because when Evie's in one of her moods, it'll be a few minutes before she actually speaks on it.

He still loses the match. Evie flips over, turning in a slow fashion reminiscent of a gas station hot dog. She blows a piece of hair out of her face.

"Did you know that we're madly in love with each other?" she asks. He knows what it's about, because he and Evie know everything about each other. Almost everything. Evie doesn't know yet about the envelope burning a hole through his desk drawer, his own personal tell-tale heart of the moment.

"Mark's full of shit."

"We broke up."

Evie and Mark weren't one of those on-again-off-again couples. They had been together for five months, and Tommy had spent those five months wondering what the hell Evie saw in the guy. This, at least, was something he had told her. Her responding shrug and "I don't know" had done nothing to explain the situation to him.

"How'd that go?" he asks her. She scrunches up her nose. Huffs out a sigh.

"We shook hands."

Things don't ever seem to phase Evie like they phase Tommy. They had met during freshman orientation, and they were such similar people that their since disbanded freshman year



friend group had joked about how they were secret siblings — which could have technically been true. Tommy was adopted.

He hadn't even meant to end up with the envelope. It'd been Cat's idea, because Cat was nosy as hell and was running out of eligible bachelors on campus to stalk on social media.

"You've never even wondered?" she had said. "You could be secret royalty. Like a lost prince or something." Tommy had leveled a look at her, and she had raised her hands in surrender. She apologized for bringing it up too, which was nice but not necessary. He had gotten it a lot, mostly from people who had a sense of how bad his adoptive parents had been.

Tommy didn't need biological parents, since they clearly hadn't needed him. He had Evie, and that was family enough for him. Evie wasn't very close with her parents either, but she had a cousin that she loved a lot, and a natural affinity for people, and at the time, Mark. In a very theoretical situation that would never be a problem, Evie had other people to fall back on.

He had told Cat to go ahead and snoop. He had told Evie none of what he was planning to do.

A month had gone by. It had been a pretty good month, all things considered. Tommy had written a very successful paper for the class he was taking on historical trade routes, Evie had killed it as Tanya in the musical theater department's production of Mamma Mia, and they had both celebrated by staying out until four am at the cast party and getting quite inebriated off of spiked cherry limeade.

Tommy had woken up around noon with a medium sized hangover and a text from Cat lighting up the screen of his phone.

*I found something.*

After that, it was a deluge of showering, and eating over-greased hashbrowns, and trying to figure out when and how to escape Evie, someone he was normally attached at the hip to, especially when recovering from a sizable night out. They had finally separated around three for Evie to go see Mark, and Tommy had sprinted over to Cat's apartment in record time.

They had sat down at the small kitchen table, and Cat had tried to offer Tommy a glass of water, as he was more out of breath than he was willing to admit.

"Just tell me what you found."

Cat had slid it across the table to him then, a plain white envelope, fully sealed.

"It's a lot," she had said. "I wanted to make sure you knew what you were getting into before you heard it."

Cat loved drama. She would gleefully tell you how the couple in her biochem class had broken up because she cheated on him with his sister, or how one of her roommates that she only sometimes liked was having a pregnancy scare, or about her own parents' messy divorce with the air of a storytime YouTuber who was about to make bank off of their genuinely really worrying personal experience. The hesitance here was off-putting. Tommy's hand clenched the corner of the envelope, wrinkling it.

"You don't have to read it now," Cat said. "Or ever. You can just keep it around in case at some point..."

She hugged him before he left, which still wasn't reassuring. He had slipped the envelope into his desk drawer and taken some deep breaths to be calm before Evie got home.

It wasn't that he didn't want to tell her. Evie was his only family, and she probably wouldn't have seen it this way, but trying to find more felt like a betrayal. And things had been getting slowly worse with Mark, so it wasn't like Evie needed something else to be worrying

about. And then it had been a month, and another few weeks, and it was a case of him feeling bad about waiting for so long to say anything.

Evie reaches up and pokes him in the cheek.

“You good?” she asks.

“You good?” he asks back. Evie thinks for a moment. Nods.

“Mark was kind of a dick,” she says. “I think I was only going out with him because it was something to do. If that makes sense? But I don’t need that external validation. I’ve got you.”

“Yeah.”

Evie sits up now, leaning against the poster covered wall on the side of Tommy’s bed. “So are you good? Because I’d think you were taking this pretty hard, but I know for a fact that you can’t stand Mark.”

They’ve got each other, right? Tommy doesn’t need to know what’s in that envelope. He doesn’t need to find whatever people Cat’s written down as being related to him. They don’t mean anything to him, when you get down to it.

Evie’s still waiting for an answer. The envelope’s still in the desk.

“I want to tell you something.”

The story spills out of him then and there. Evie listens, she’s always been a much better listener than people give her credit for, knowing where to nod and where to gasp. Tommy can see the gears turning in her mind, the slow realization of how long this has been going on. He finishes the story, and they are left in silence, other than the Mario Kart menu music, still playing quietly from Tommy’s Nintendo Switch.

“You know what I’m gonna ask,” Evie says eventually.

He really fucking doesn't. He gestures for her to go ahead.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to lose you."

"Well, I don't want to lose you." Evie's tracking him with her eyes now, because unlike the majority of people, who don't make eye contact during arguments, Evie tends to make more eye contact than she usually does. It's off putting, although Tommy knows she does it to try and demonstrate that she is paying attention to your point of view. "It kinda seems like the person keeping secrets is the person pulling away more."

Her words hit Tommy like a solid right hook. "I — you know...adoptive parents sometimes get mad when their kids go looking for their birth parents."

"Your parents are shitty people."

"You're not."

Evie gives him a puzzled look, a smile dancing around the corners of her lips. "Dude, what? Freud would have something to say about that for sure."

"Freud's a bitch."

"Well, yeah."

The Mario Kart music fades out, the Switch having turned itself to sleep mode.

"You're my family. And I just didn't want you to think you weren't enough for me."

Tommy's back hits the mattress violently as Evie tackles him into a hug, compressing him with her full bodyweight. "People can have multiple family members, you stupid asshole."

"I know that."

Evie sits up and scrunches her nose at him, reaching over to his desk to grab a tissue with which to dab at the tears streaming down his face. He rolls his eyes and pulls her back down into another hug.

The sun's set by the time either of them make a move to do anything besides watch videos on Evie's phone. Evie rolls out of Tommy's bed, crossing to her closet.

"Okay, I've got to go look good in the dining hall before Mark starts spreading rumors that I'm sad about the breakup, you coming? Or..." Evie glances towards his desk drawer. "We could just order takeout and read what's in that envelope."

Tommy stares at the glow-in-the-dark stars they had affixed to the ceiling, as if they'll be able to tell him whether or not he's ready to read what's in the envelope. He's not, he decides. He's probably not, and that's enough doubt that he doesn't want to. Evie stands expectantly, and maybe for tonight it's enough to just know that when he is ready to find out where he comes from, he won't be doing it alone. He doesn't need whoever the envelope says he's related to. But maybe when it comes time for it, he'll want them.

"I know enough people for now," he says. Evie snorts in laughter. "Let's go get food poisoning."

## **All We Can Depend On**

Elise is the only one who has anything worthwhile to say at the funeral. Every other person, it's all "I'm so sorry for your loss" and "She was such a good person" and just various other bullshit platitudes that Sheena could really do without. Elise is their actual friend, even if they haven't seen each other in person for the past few years, ever since Elise moved away for med school.

"What a depressing funeral," she says, sliding into a seat next to Sheena with a plate of cheese and crackers. She offers them the plate, and they take a piece of sharp white cheddar.

"Most funerals are depressing," they reply, popping the cheese into their mouth.

"Yeah. But Veronica doesn't deserve that."

Sheena doesn't cry, because they ran out of tears somewhere between "There was an accident — your sister —" and realizing that it really had been an accident, and there was no one upon whom to enact revenge.

Death was no stranger to the Van Helsing family, and neither was undeath. From the late 19th century onward, the Van Helsing had been a major part of the vampire hunting community. That was how they and Elise knew each other. The Van Helsing and the Seward had always been close friends.

Sheena stares at Elise as she polishes off her plate of cheese. She's the type of person you wouldn't expect as a vampire hunter, a dainty blonde girl with a history of ballet dancing and baking. Her wardrobe is all pastels, her vibe is all Disney princess. Sheena's well aware that she's got a steel backbone under all the rose gold jewelry, tiny cross included, but many people in the vampire hunting community refuse to take her seriously. Sheena looks like a vampire

hunter, or at least a punk. Their clothes are mostly ripped, their naturally blonde hair is dyed black using Arctic Fox's Transylvania (and the irony of that name is not lost on them). They've got a pin-laden battle jacket that they plan to die and be buried in, and that they got in a screaming match with their mother about just that morning when they decided to wear it to the funeral. They've got Docs with blood stains that most people kindly don't point out. Honestly, sitting next to Elise, they probably look like they've been transported in from a different dimension, one lacking all the "normalcy" that Elise manages to project.

"So," Elise says. "You've never visited me in New London."

"I don't need a break."

"I don't think you should take a break. I think you should come stay with me to New London."

Elise is a woman who Sheena knows to possess very little fear. But now, they notice the tenseness in her shoulders, the restless movement of her hands. She glances around warily, eyes flickering with uncertainty.

"I think it's happening again," she says.

There were vampires before 1897. There were vampires before there was any understanding of what a vampire might be. And there were people who knew how to kill them, but not a community. Not like in the modern day, where the descendants of the people who had taken out the most famous vampire of all time dealt with undead threats all around the world.

Even if you hadn't the foggiest idea that vampires really existed, you knew who Dracula was. And even if you had only last week killed your first vampire, you knew that there was

always a chance that Dracula would return. It had happened in France in the 1930s, India in the 1960s, and Australia in the 1990s.

Veronica had always wanted to be involved in a return. It honestly would have made perfect sense for her, she had been a talented hunter, skilled in decapitation, able to find the heart in one stab, and an expert in detecting the signs of vampirism. Sheena was good at hitting hard and that was about it.

But there is no more Veronica Van Helsing to defeat a Dracula recurrence. There's only Sheena, who can try their best.

A friend of Elise's has been exhibiting tell-tale signs. Sleepwalking, unusual loss of energy, blood loss. The whole nine yards. It'll happen sometimes that a friend of a hunter will be targeted, but Helena Westenra is a hunter herself. Also, there's the glaring issue of the last name. A Westenra hunter falling victim to being turned is a red flag of the highest caliber.

But more than anything, it's Elise's fear that convinces Sheena. They'd only seen her afraid a handful of times, really, most of which were in direct relation to her horrible ex-boyfriend, who was more interested in becoming a vampire than he was treating his girlfriend like a person. Elise doesn't get scared unless there's a good reason. So Sheena ignores any part of this that feels like too much of a coincidence to be true and packs herself a bag.

Elise drives Sheena and herself down to New London, and very politely allows Sheena control of the radio, even though she'd probably rather listen to Taylor Swift than Bauhaus. It's a solid two hours of companionable silence, and they even stop at a 7-11 to get slushie suicides. Since Veronica — it's been a while since Sheena was able to take their mind off of things, even for a little while, so they appreciate the chance now. And eventually, they even switch the music over to Fleetwood Mac, so Elise can hum along.



If there's really a recurrence happening, maybe this is their chance to do something about it. For Veronica. And then...it would be the same as the revenge they would have gotten had her death been purposeful.

Right?

Helena Westenra is a tall brunette woman, a few years Veronica's junior. She has blunt bangs and long hair, and there's no mistaking the dark circles under her eyes, although it's clear from the lack of visible marks on her neck that she's been making use of concealer. She gives Sheena a thin-lipped smile in greeting.

"Van Helsing."

"Sheena is fine. It's nice to meet you."

"Wish I could say the same, but the circumstances leave a lot to be desired."

Helena steps aside, allowing the duo entrance into her house. It's nice, almost purposefully plain in decoration and use of colors. Sheena takes in the neutral toned furniture, their eyes glazing over until hitting a photo wall. There's only a few photos framed on it, but all of them depict Helena or a younger, blonder girl. The girl has bouncy curls and a wide smile, although it shrinks noticeably in the photos with Helena and the couple that Sheena presumes to be their parents.

"My sister Alexis," Helena says, seeing where Sheena's eyes have landed. "I haven't told her about this, so I'm trusting you to do the same."

"You haven't told her you're going to die?"

Helena gives Sheena a slightly puzzled look. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're supposed to be here so I don't die."

“Am I?” Sheena asks, glancing over at Elise, who is studying an abstract piece of wall art that was probably bought at a Target and steadfastly refusing to make eye contact. “Of course. Just meant it might be helpful to her to be prepared for the possibility.”

“She’s not very interested in the family business. It’d just start a fight, and on the off chance I do die, I’d prefer for it not to be while fighting with my sister.” There’s a mettle in Helena’s voice that makes Sheena think it’s probably in their best interest to drop the subject.

“Alright,” they say. “What’s the plan?”

The plan, if you could even call it that, was for Sheena to join Helena on her nightly patrol, after which they would keep a vigil at her garlic protected bedside. Helena was convinced that the turning had roots in hypnosis, as every vampire hunter worth their salt knew to keep at the very least, fresh garlic flowers in their room.

“Who or what ever is doing this to me, I doubt it’s happening while I’m asleep,” Helena had said. Thus, the two person patrol. Elise, straight A nursing student that she was, had unfortunately been called in at the last minute for a practicum that she “just couldn’t miss”. As she was rushing out the door, she promised multiple times in a row to be back as quickly as possible so she and Sheena could sleep in shifts at Helena’s bedside. Alexis, Helena had told them, was spending the night at her boyfriend’s house, so she wouldn’t be there to question the two other women observing her sleeping sister, creepy no matter who you were, but extra worrying with the added factor of vampiric turning.

New London was a small town, with a relatively inactive nightlife, so not many other people were out on the streets with Helena and Sheena. It was late September, and the beginnings of a fall chill were in the air, although in their battle jacket, Sheena wasn’t too

worried about the temperature. Helena had a light brown cardigan, and Sheena reflected on how so many vampire hunters (themselves an exception) really didn't dress the way you'd expect a trained killer to.

The night went by slowly. Helena's usual route was predictably clear of vampires, and if Sheena was being honest, they highly doubted whoever was turning her would make their presence known with a second hunter there — especially one sporting a large Van Helsing family crest. Instead, the two fell into conversation.

Helena was nice to talk to, it turned out that her day job was as a writer and that she was hoping to get into the comics industry someday, her particular favorite being X-Men. Sheena had no day job, but they liked comics alright, and were able to hold up their end of the conversation readily. And it was a breath of fresh air to talk to someone who wasn't seconds away from mentioning how Sheena's sister was dead at all times. Which isn't to say that sisters didn't come up, the topic of conversation turning to Alexis Westenra, and her adamant resistance to the responsibilities that came with her name.

"I love her a lot, but she kind of refuses to do something if I've done it before," Helena explains. "She's very much focused on forging her own path. And honestly, all of that would be okay if she wasn't always trying to convince me to leave the family business behind as well."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"I had a close call a few years back. The vampire had an assistant who shot me in the stomach. If Alexis hadn't been out with me that night, I would have died for sure. Since then, I think she thinks I can't handle myself."

Sheena refrains from stating the obvious — that if Helena was currently being turned it was probably proof that she couldn't handle herself — since that isn't exactly helpful feedback.

“Your sister cares about you,” they say. “That’s what matters.”

Helena smiles ruefully. “I guess so.”

There’s a flash of movement in the tree line along the wooded path the two have been walking on. Sheena whips their head towards it, smoothly pulling and loading a hand crossbow from their bag. They step into the trees, eyes darting to any shadow that looks even slightly off. But there’s no further movement. They lower the crossbow, turning back to Helena.

“False ala —”

What remains of Helena Westenra is horribly mangled. Her left arm hangs on by a thread and if Sheena hadn’t known with complete certainty what person was with them, they would have trouble identifying her by her face now. Her blood soaks into the pavement, leaking out of gashes put there by something that moved far faster than it should have been able to.

She’s dead.

Sheena glances around rapidly, hoping against odds that whatever vampire killed her had the decency and stupidity to stay in the area. It’s probably futile, any vampire with this complicated a plan of turning is too smart to stay near a fresh kill. But Sheena’s eyes fall on a brief flash of movement, and they’re sprinting before they even realize it, crossbow held tightly in their hand.

The flash of movement careens deeper into the wooded area, Sheena hot on its heels. But no matter how long they’ve been doing this or how good a vampire hunter they are, Sheena can’t exactly catch up to something that’s moving at a pace faster than any mortal being can.

They have to admit defeat eventually, shooting one crossbow bolt that may or may not hit its mark into the distance, then doubling over to try and catch their breath.

“Fuck.”

Alexis Westenra doesn't take the news well. Sheena didn't take the news of their older sister's death well either, but where their response was a staring numbness, Alexis' response is to punch a hole in the wall, right next to the photo of herself and Helena at her college graduation.

"What —" she says, her voice shaking with soon to be shed tears, " — the actual fuck happened?"

After allowing herself a moment to mourn the woman they had been enjoying getting to know, Sheena had taken note of the trail camera to later get the footage and placed an anonymous call about an animal attack. They had called Elise immediately, who told her boss about her family emergency and left her practicum to meet Sheena at the Westenra house. Elise had called Alexis, but there had been no need. Alexis was home, her boyfriend having had last minute plans with his father. She had been prepared to surprise her sister with takeout, and despite their stomach grumbling, Sheena had resisted the alluring scent of tikka masala. Distantly, they wondered if it was a sign of some deeper issue that the sight of a mangled corpse no longer caused them to lose their appetite.

"And she didn't think to, I don't know, tell me about any of this?" Sheena realizes that while they were tuned out, Elise has been getting Alexis caught up. They watch her sit down heavily on the couch, running a hand through her hair. "Jesus."

"You might not have been able to save her anyway," Sheena offers. "Since, you know. Recurrence and all."

Alexis looks up sharply. "Who the fuck are you anyway?"

"Sheena Van Helsing."

“I did originally think it could be a recurrence,” Elise says. “So I asked Sheena to come help, and they kind of needed —”

“To stick their nose in where they aren’t wanted? It’s not a fucking Dracula reoccurrence, you asshole. Even I know enough to know that.”

“It could still be —” Sheena tries.

“Couldn’t.” Alexis’ glare is stony. “My sister’s death isn’t some fucking game for you to play. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me, happening right now in this moment and you are daydreaming about how the big bad Van Helsing is going to kill Dracula again. You left my sister’s dead body lying on the pavement. And don’t start saying some shit about protocol, because you could have at least brought her home instead of just waiting for someone else to find her. You know, people call me an unfeeling bitch sometimes, but if you had a sister who died on the side of the road, I would have tried to do right by the two of you. I would cry for your sister, if she was a person who existed. Why wouldn’t you cry for mine?”

Sheena’s already most of the way out of the door when they hear Elise’s shocked gasp and “Their sister —”

They don’t cry. They run blindly, weaving down random side streets until they have no strength left in their legs. They collapse to the pavement and scream.

Veronica Van Helsing had first read Bram Stoker’s Dracula when she was twelve, because she was a fucking nerd. She hadn’t been able to convince her eight year old sibling to read it with her, but she had been able to convince them to listen to her recapping of each important plot point, each pivotal moment. As she grew older and gained more access to the records of the recurrences, this interest had only grown. She charted important plot points, tacked

together on a corkboard the events that happened every time, the people from each family that had been present, how frequently a Dracula would make an appearance. She knew every who, what, where, and when. Sheena had tried to read the novel many times throughout their life. They had never made it further than halfway through.

But they knew Dracula. They knew Dracula recurrences. Because as much as it really didn't interest them, it interested Veronica, and they would always be a willing audience for her.

So they had known from the get go that this wasn't adding up. Just because a Westenra was being turned, it didn't mean it was a Dracula narrative. For one thing, there needed to be a hunter from at least one other family involved before Sheena turned up. For another, the next recurrence wasn't due for another ten or so years. Sheena knew this because Veronica had a big 2030 calendar up on her wall, the words "earliest potential recurrence year" written over it. Really, when you looked at it correctly, there was no reason for Sheena to have thought this would actually be the so-called recurrence. They had just wanted it. For Veronica.

"It'll be us fighting Dracula this time," Veronica had always told them. "I just know it." Sheena had never mentioned that there was really only ever one Van Helsing, and they were confident it wouldn't be them with their sister as an option.

They shouldn't have gotten involved. That much is clear, since it's not like they really did anything helpful for Helena other than create an extra step before the killer could get to her.

Really, when you thought about it, this was all Elise's fault.

Four days later, there's a knock on the door of the hotel room Sheena had holed themselves up in. Although they had originally planned to stay with Elise, and she had texted to tell them they were still welcome, they stubbornly wanted to make themselves scarce for a while. They had

been doing pretty well for themselves alone too, they had thrown away every piece of trash from the takeout they had been ordering and even been regularly changing clothes and showering. In terms of what had happened to them recently, you had to admit that some people would have been doing worse.

Elise, who had been the one to knock, seems to feel differently, if her worried glance around the room is anything to go by. Sheena waits for her to speak, silently raising an eyebrow. Guy Fieri blabbers on in the background, as having the Food Network as a constant backing track was currently better company than Sheena's thoughts.

"I just thought you might want to know what Alexis and I found," Elise says.

"You never even thought this was a recurrence."

Elise sighs. "I thought I could do something to distract you for a bit."

"That saving someone else's sister would make me feel better about mine being dead?"

"I — well..."

"You've got to get better at this if you ever want to get your psychology certification. Come on, doc. Diagnose me."

"Can you stop being a dick for a minute?"

"No."

"I didn't think it was a recurrence. But I was — I am scared."

And it's true. That's the one thing that hadn't been clicking for Sheena. Elise was an alright actor, but she wouldn't have needed to fake being afraid to convince Sheena she thought a recurrence was happening. As much as Sheena wants to blame Elise, they recognize that the reason they believed her is because they wanted to.



“Dead things keep turning up on my doorstep. Small mammals and birds. It’s been happening since around when Helena started to be turned.” Elise takes a deep breath, and Sheena reminds herself that they’re angry with her and they don’t want to comfortingly take her hand. “I don’t know if she mentioned the thrall that shot her, but he was friends with my ex. You know. The — my ex.”

Elise’s ex, who she never mentions, especially not by name, was obsessed with becoming a vampire. He was also obsessed with her, and she found that out first. It had been cute until it had been creepy, and she had liked the attention until it had turned into control, and then shouting matches, and then covering up injuries that she had gotten somewhere other than in a fight with a vampire. Sheena kept telling her that they could help, but Elise insisted on dealing with the issue herself. He — Callum wasn’t around anymore, and Elise had never specified why, but she hadn’t known anything about poisons before that relationship and she was an expert now.

“Alexis saw the thrall — Duncan — last night. She thinks he might be the one who killed Helena.”

“And you think your ex might be back.”

Elise nods.

“You could have just said that.”

“You keep saying things that imply you’ve been easy to get through to. Sheena, before we saw each other at the funeral, you spent two weeks declining my calls and ignoring my texts. I thought if I appealed to your feelings about Veronica, you’d be able to pay attention.”

“That’s not fair.”

“To either of us. I know.”

Guy Fieri experiences great delight upon consumption of the greasiest tacos ever to be made, and Sheena still doesn't move to comfort Elise.

"How's Alexis doing?" they ask instead.

"Poorly. The funeral's in a couple of days."

Sheena nods.

"She feels bad about what she said to you."

"I don't care."

"Okay." Elise stands up. "I should go. But — I know you can't get revenge for what happened to Veronica. You could still help someone else do the same thing. And...if it is...if my ex is back. I wouldn't mind having you there."

Sheena doesn't say anything else. Elise leaves. Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives switches over to Beat Bobby Flay.

Helena's funeral is just as depressing as Veronica's was. Actually, the more Sheena thinks about it, the more every funeral is just unequivocally depressing. They'd want a fun funeral, something where people talk about how wonderful they had been instead of shitty it is that they're gone.

Most of the people in attendance give Sheena weird looks as they stalk past, but they're used to weird looks, and it's not like they're wearing anything different than what they wore to their own sister's funeral, so maybe people could try and get some perspective.

Alexis looks up as Sheena plops herself down next to her, red-tinged eyes darting at her. She's wearing a very pretty black dress and a very tired scowl.

"What do you want?" she says. "I told Elise to tell you I was sorry."

“Well, I’m sorry too. I wish I had done more for Helena.”

Alexis shrugged. “You know, she could have done more for herself too. Like telling me anything before just up and dying.”

“My sister died from a blood clot in her brain.” It’s the first time Sheena’s said it out loud. “There was nothing anyone could have done. If a vampire had killed her, I could have killed them back.”

“I’m not letting you project your issues on me.”

“I’m not asking to.”

Alexis lets out a deep sigh. “I fucking hate Dracula, you know? Us Westenras get such a shitty depiction. Even the Holmwoods have it better, and who even knows who Arthur Holmwood is?”

Sheena nods silently. Alexis gives them a half smile and hands them a flask, pulled from a pocket of her dress. It’s whiskey, and it’s strong, but Sheena swallows it down out of politeness.

“Hunting down and killing a vampire named Duncan won’t make either of us feel better about our sisters’ deaths,” Alexis says.

“I know that,” Sheena replies.

Alexis smirks.

“Wanna do it anyway?”

## The Ravenwood Heir

# LOST RAVENWOOD HEIR FOUND!

By Samuel Lee

After a whirlwind search, the truth has finally come to light. After the shocking revelation from one Miss Jane Wilson, former housemaid at the Ravenwood Estate that the former Lord Edgar Ravenwood had a secret child as the result of an affair with a painter, a desperate search to find this child began. After the recent passing of Lord Edgar, this child stands to inherit the entirety of the estate. Now, according to a tip from a current employee at the Ravenwood Estate, the heir has been found. Their identity is still being kept a secret, but there is to be a masquerade ball held in about a fortnight at which the new Liege of the estate will be introduced. This event is sure to be one of the social highlights of the year, and anyone who is lucky enough to be invited will certainly be in for an eventful evening.

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YOUR PRESENCE IS REQUESTED:

A ball, to be held at the Ravenwood Estate

Commencing at 8pm on the eve of the 12th

RSVP required for entry

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My mother and I will of course be in attendance. We're both quite excited to meet my long lost cousin.

Lord Simon Copeland

Lot —

I'm interested in attending the Ravenwood Masquerade. Any chance I could be your plus one?

And don't give me any of that ancestral feud nonsense, I know you can't resist a dramatic party.

You'll be there. And hopefully I will too!

— Ivy

The invite is quite generous, and I shall certainly be in attendance, accompanied by my dear friend Mx. Ivy Claremont. Looking forward to an exciting evening.

Lady Carlotta di Martelli

I'm honored to have been invited, although I'm unsure as to why I was. Although I suppose it is a night for unexpected children. Ignore my ramblings. I do hope Ben is the one reading these.

Well.

Mr. Icarus Rhodes

Ben —

I confess some worry as to how the heir will respond to my presence, but I will be in attendance regardless. Perhaps this will be a way to reconnect. And it is nice to hear from you as well. How are your mothers? Give them my best.

— Jane Wilson

Benny!

I think you forgot to send me an invitation, but no worries! I got my hands on one regardless.

Happy to attend, chum. Can't wait for this scoop!

Your pal,

Mr. Samuel Lee

It shall certainly be a night to remember. I'm glad to be part of it.

Miss Alice Holmes

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The Diary of Miss Alice Holmes — entry from September 12th

I must admit, I was nervous upon my entry into the grand ballroom of the Ravenwood Estate. It has been a tumultuous few weeks, and I had been so thoroughly put out of sorts that I had no clue what to expect next.

The ballroom was not perhaps as full as I had expected it to be, but the amount of people still felt overwhelming. I spotted Ben rather quickly, which served to help me calm my breathing, knowing that I had at least one ally in the room.

There were a few people my eye was drawn to. A rather weasely-looking young man with a thin mustache was studying the people in the room with a suspicious eye while his shrill-voiced mother told an enthralled audience how she didn't think much of whatever bastard was trying to take her son's rightful inheritance. I suspected at the time, but would come to learn for certain later in the night, that they were the Copelands, the second cousins that had been ousted from inheriting this estate. I confess I hold no fond feelings for Lord Simon and Lady Edith, and I truly hope I shall not be seeing them again anytime soon.

An older woman, standing by herself on the edges of the room, quietly nursing a drink caught my attention as well. She had a vague air of familiarity to her, and when I looked at her she looked back, giving me a pleasant smile and a nod before looking away again, not unreminiscent of my mother's own cool demeanor.

The final person I was drawn to was a tall young woman, her beautiful dark hair intricately styled, falling in curls around her tanned face. Her long crimson gown hugged her

form tightly, and when my eyes met hers, she gazed at me with a burning intensity. She was bewitching.

Perhaps this night was not going to be all bad after all.

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The following documents have been decoded through about five different ciphers.

Agent Claremont —

All you must do is in some way make contact with the Ravenwood heir and give them our card and a brief summary of our mission statement. There is no need for the usual tomfoolery with which you frequently conduct your business.

#### I. Claremont Mission Report (1/2)

First of all, fuck you, if you talk to me like that I'm going to engage in twice as much tomfoolery as usual.

Upon our arrival, myself and the Contessa Carlotta di Martelli garnered a lot of attention, although I believe my presence was less notable than the fact I was accompanying her. I am sure the rivalry between her family and the Ravenwoods made her presence more than surprising. We did not have to wait long until a waifish young woman with pale brown hair and a simple blue dress who yours truly immediately clocked as the Ravenwood heir, despite the rest of the ballroom — including the Contessa, who stared at her in a way that made me think that a sequel



to Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers might be on the way — seemingly not noticing this made her appearance.

You told me to make contact, but given my associations, I thought that perhaps simply leaving a message somewhere to be discovered later would be sufficient. A brief stint of eavesdropping on her conversation with the head of staff revealed which room she would be moving into. I recalled the briefing mentioning some secret tunnels, and figured if I started enough conversations about them, someone would eventually say something helpful.

Someone eventually did. As the son of the man who built the house, Mr. Icarus Rhodes, a rather handsome dark-skinned man in a colorful suit was the perfect person to help me find the tunnels, which he did willingly, citing the ball itself as a rather boring endeavor.

This is my tomfoolery. Although I successfully deposited the letter, it was with Mr. Rhodes' assistance. He is a fascinating man, his skill with puzzles seems to be unmatched from what he was telling me. I gave him my card. I think he could be quite the asset.

I'll cut my notes here, to save you the rest of the night.

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Appeal from the Lord Simon Copeland —

You must understand, I had no idea who she was when we first met. I thought her to be simply an unknown-to-me member of the gentry, and a rather pretty one at that. And there was a method to my madness. If I was to be caught alone in the study, I would have immediately fallen under suspicion. To be caught with a pretty young woman, however...the suspicions would be different. Really, it's her own fault for agreeing to come with me.

If the Contessa Carlotta di Martelli had not already been in the study, things might have proceeded differently. I have never liked the Contessa, even though I am barely a Ravenwood, but truly, it is a wonder anyone likes her. Her attitude is elitist and her conversational skills leave much to be desired, the amount of jokes she makes at the expense of the others around her leaving little doubt as to why she is not yet married. But the Contessa was there, and she engaged the woman I now know is Lady Ravenwood in conversation while I searched the desk. She did not stop me from investigating, which makes me believe the rumors around her sticky fingers. Perhaps I am not the only person who should be arrested from that party.

The Ravenwood estate is rightfully mine. If you do not acknowledge a child in life, you cannot do so after your death. I know the actions I took to rectify the situation may be seen as reprehensible to you, but it seemed the only choice to retain my property.

And the bullets didn't even hit her, so truly, for what can I be blamed?

---

My dear cousin Paloma —

Enclosed is the locket of your mother's that Lord Edgar stole all those years ago. Ivy seemed to become quite good friends with Mr. Icarus Rhodes throughout the party, so it didn't take them much convincing to take me through the tunnels into his office, where I found it in a desk drawer. Please take a brief pause from reading this letter to imagine me gloating. I can't believe that you thought I couldn't do it.

I confess, the locket may not be my only reason for writing. You surely have seen by now the articles about Lady Alice Ravenwood. I must confess, from the moment she first appeared as

a stranger, I was quite taken with her. She and the Lord Simon Copeland actually found me in the office, and although Lord Simon was suspicious, he was ultimately there to learn the name of the heir in order to dispose of them, so dared not say anything in case I would turn the finger of suspicion back on to him. Alice did not know of his intentions, and she was a pleasant conversationalist while I planned my escape. But when Lord Simon found her birth certificate hidden in the desk, his instinct was to pull a gun on her.

You understand that I had no choice but to pull her into the tunnels with me. I know we are hereditary enemies, but she was not raised a Ravenwood, and better her as the heir than Lord Simon. I would not simply let someone die for a history of animosity that I confess now I do not even know the source of.

It was dark and cramped in the tunnels, but cool from the September air. I could hear Alice's heart beating, almost outpacing my own rapid heartbeat. I confess I do not know which of us leaned in first, but there was a spark when her lips met mine which became a fire when her hands made their way into my hair. When she was up on that stage announcing her true identity to the party, I could see how the collar of her dress was rumpled from where my hand had grabbed her.

I know. The di Martellis and the Ravenwoods have never gotten along. But Alice was not a Ravenwood in name until a month ago, and she carries none of their beliefs or attitudes. She is kind, funny, and sweet — and an incredible lover, if it's not too much for me to say.

Maybe we should reconsider.

Yours,

Contessa Carlotta di Martelli

My dear cousin Carlotta —

Harlot.

But in all seriousness, you may be right. Mama is overjoyed upon the return of her locket, and what better way to get one up on those stuffy bastards than making sure their line changes for the better? We could turn over a new leaf.

Also, no woman has so enchanted you before, it seems. Perhaps we shall come meet her, I'd rather get to know your paramour in person than through the gossip articles about the two of you.

Yours,

Contessa Paloma di Martelli

Mx. Ivy Claremont —

I confess, I write with some trepidation. I am not a very personable person, and I am unsure how to reach out in a normal manner. But I deeply wish to.

There was something quite intriguing about you, and it wasn't just your offer of a job in which my puzzle-making skills would be useful. Which is not to say I am not interested in such a job, but simply that I am more interested in you.

I am not good at this.

Would you like to perhaps meet for lunch tomorrow? You could tell me more about this strange job. Or more about yourself.

Mr. Icarus Rhodes

Icarus —

I'd love to grab lunch! I know of a few more subtle restaurants, although I think I'll have to ask Carlotta to make sure she's not taking her not so secret girlfriend to any of them. If I had a dollar for everytime a di Martelli was subtle, I'd be flat broke.

See you tomorrow, I'm looking forward to it.

Ivy

To the Lady Edith Copeland —

I am not sorry for reporting your son for attempted murder, and frankly I wish I had had the opportunity years ago. Or at the very least, I wish I could implicate you as well so that you would stop writing to me. The fact of the matter is this: he shot twice at my employer, and she most likely would have been hit if it were not for the quick and heroic actions of the Contessa di Martelli.

I would advise you to cease writing to me and start helping your son prepare his legal defense.

Ben Miller

Head of House for Lady Alice Ravenwood

Miss Jane Wilson —

It was a pleasure to meet you (again, I suppose) last week, and I am deeply sorry that we did not have much time to talk. I hope you don't find this a strange request, but I would love to entertain you for dinner, if possible. I confess I am not entirely prepared to become a part of this world, and would love to hear your thoughts. My mother sends her regards as well.

Lady Alice Ravenwood

Lady Ravenwood —

I would deeply enjoy that.

Jane

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## THE RAVENWOOD HEIR — A WEEK LATER

By Samuel Lee

As yours truly reported a week ago, the ball at which the identity of Lady Alice Ravenwood was revealed was truly a spectacle. Lord Simon Copeland, who was accused of attempted murder against Lady Alice, has been found unequivocally guilty, as he has admitted to trying to clear his path to the inheritance. Luckily, thanks to the heroic actions coming from a surprising source — the Contessa Carlotta di Martelli (who this reporter thinks has been getting quite cozy with Lady Alice since then), she was completely unharmed. Lady Ravenwood seems to be making quite the waves already, offering a portion of her inheritance to social reform and assisting the less fortunate. We shall be interested to see what she does next.

## **Wormwood and Rosemary**

The first time you see her again, after five years, it's such a shock that you spill scalding coffee all over yourself. She sees you too, staring and frozen, as the woman whose hand is intertwined with her own realizes she has stopped moving and looks back in worry. One of you has to start moving first, and you're worried if it's her, she'll run again. So, dripping with coffee, you cross the coffee shop and grab her other hand.

"Please just give me an hour," you say, willing your voice not to crack. She's still frozen, and you can see the familiar little furrow in her brow that means she's trying very hard not to cry. Neither of you were prepared for this moment.

"Leda," the other woman says, and there's an edge in her voice, a distrust of you that you can't exactly blame. But she has to see it, right? The high cheekbones, dark hair and eyes. You're both wearing the same ring on a chain around your neck, for fuck's sake. Leda blinks, just once, and squeezes your hand, tentatively, like she's not even completely sure you're there. She looks back and forth between the two of you quickly, like she's not sure what direction the introduction needs to be made in. She settles.

"This is Sebastian, Velia," she tells the woman. "My brother."

Here is every dinner you have from the age of nine to fourteen. Leda is three years older than you, but relatively well-behaved up until the day she snaps and decides she's sick of putting in the effort to get along with your parents.

They are not good parents. The belief you have come to hold is that people should not have children in order to accomplish things such as "continue the family line" or "have them take

over the family business someday.” Essentially, you should not have children if you have any plans for their future that are not simply that you will love them.

Dinner. Three combatants enter the ring.

Here are your father’s points: Leda is a Voltinea, and Voltineas must do things in a certain way. Children must listen to their parents, as they are the ones who brought her into the world.

Here are your mother’s points: Leda is being completely disrespectful. There will be consequences for her actions.

Here are Leda’s points: She is her own goddamn person. She doesn’t want to be her parents. Is that so fucking hard to understand?

Just as an example, you think about the dinner after your parents catch Leda kissing another girl at the stupid company picnic for their real estate business. Your mother is in tears, claiming that Leda is betraying her family by choosing her own romantic partner. Your father’s stony glare is burning a hole in Leda’s furrowed brow. Later, he’ll rip the pages out of one of her “stupid fantasy books” just to teach her a lesson.

Just as an example, you think about a dinner from when you were both much younger, and a nine year old Leda doesn’t understand why the C on her math test means she can’t spend time with the gardeners anymore. Your parents don’t want her to have any distractions from her future, and that includes having hobbies she actually likes.

Just as an example, you think about one of the last dinners you all had as a family, where your father’s coworkers had been bragging about their children’s college acceptances, and Leda hadn’t gotten in anywhere yet. While your father stares and your mother turns on the waterworks, like usual, Leda casually chews on a bite of steak. After she’s continuously goaded your parents by really leaning into the fact that she’s a disappointment, they lock her in her room



for almost a full day. It doesn't even bother her, because they've done it so many times that she knows to keep food in there.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter what variation of the argument they're on, what the exact actual circumstances are. Those points are always what it boils down to.

Leda's always right. Of course Leda's always right, because she's just arguing that she should (that both of you should) get to live her own life and not one that is predetermined for her by two other people who have no understanding of who she is. You used to try and speak up on her behalf, but she told you pretty firmly to stop doing that.

"You don't need to also get in trouble," she said. "You fly under the radar, and maybe you can make it out of this house alive." She says stuff like that all the time, and always calls it hyperbole when you worry about it. Of course she never means that she's going to die, that would be ridiculous. Stop being ridiculous, Seb.

You asked your mother once, why her and your father were always so tough on Leda. Your mother told you that they were doing it out of love, and they were tough on Leda so she would be able to grow up and understand how the world works, just like how you did. And then she immediately went and accused Leda of trying to turn you against them, which was its whole own screaming match.

"Living in this house turns you against them," Leda had said, when you snuck her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich after she had been sent to her room with no dinner. "I don't have to do anything."

You agreed with her. Your parents loved you, as much as they were capable of, but there was no mistake to be made that that love was dependent on you not turning out like Leda. You had to fly under the radar.

You still fly under the radar. You don't talk to them if you can help it, and they don't reach out except for when they need you around to keep up appearances. You were never bold like Leda was, willing to cut them off completely.

There's a park three blocks from the coffee shop, and the autumn chill hasn't quite set in yet, so that's where you and Leda go, to sit awkwardly at a picnic bench. Velia goes to sit somewhere else in the park and read while the two of you talk, and she kisses Leda before leaving, which you're still processing to some extent.

"That's my girlfriend," Leda says, after a few minutes. "I mean, we kissed so you can probably guess that, but...she's my girlfriend."

"You've got a girlfriend," you say, very smartly. Leda always said she would never date anyone. *Come on, Seb. And subject someone to my fucked-up bullshit? No way.*

"How'd you two meet?"

"I work at a florist." Which is a perfect job for Leda. She's always been hugely into flower meanings. She became a master of the "fuck you" bouquet quite young, getting her parents lovely flowers that were secretly an expression of her deep distaste for them as people. The bouquet consisted of orange lilies for hatred, foxglove for insincerity, and yellow carnations to say "you have disappointed me". Her favorite flower was the larkspur (lightness and levity) while mine was the heliotrope (devotion and faithfulness).

"Velia came in to get flowers for her father's grave. I gave her wormwood and rosemary, absence and remembrance. She was very impressed with my knowledge of flower meanings, asked if she could consult me on it for something she was writing. She was really nice, and also

pretty, so I said yes. There's a lot more to the story, but that's how we met. And I want to know about you."

"Do you?"

It's a low blow, but perhaps an accurate one. Normally, when someone doesn't speak to you for five years, you don't get the feeling that they want to speak to you at all. And you feel a twinge of guilt, because you can tell Leda knows what you mean. She breaks eye contact with you and her mouth pulls into a thin line. Leda was always explosive with your parents, with most people she disagreed with. But when the two of you disagreed, she was always sullen, quiet. Unwilling to fight with you. And it doesn't exactly feel fair to you, but you don't want to miss this chance to talk to your sister. Just in case there isn't another one.

"I'm at Columbia. I'm studying law."

"Do you like it?"

It's a lesser ivy, which was disappointing to your parents. They weren't sure about law either, having wanted you to study business, but you convinced them it was worthwhile. Anyways, you're an adult now, and you might have implied that you could leave like Leda did, and then they'd have no children to parade around like trophies for their business partners. They let you do what you want. You get the feeling that they'll be mad when they learn you want to practice family law, but they'd be more mad if you said they inspired you to do it.

"I like it."

It's clear neither of you know what to talk about. You've been apart too long, all the stories you might want to tell are too wide in scope for what feels like a limited amount of time. And you could talk more about yourself, but the truth of the matter is that you haven't been up to

much. You have a few friends, a few hobbies. You're just an average person, not a runaway, someone who managed to drop off the face of the Earth. You didn't disappear.

"Tell me about yourself," you say. It's the best you can muster.

She does.

You're fifteen, and Leda is eighteen, and she is a disappointment in the eyes of your parents. She hasn't disappointed you yet, and at this moment you don't believe that she ever could.

Her birthday was a week ago, and it passed with very little fanfare. Your parents claim they're waiting to celebrate when she gets into college, and they didn't know why Leda found that so funny. You do. Leda never applied to any colleges.

"It's not that I don't want to go," she explained to you. "It's just a situation where I need to be able to cut them off completely. And I can't do that if they're paying for me to go to college."

She's been saying more and more things like this recently. Hints that she's leaving. You're not that worried about it, because it's Leda. You always knew she'd leave, but it's not like you won't still be able to talk to her. You're both each other's most important person. But still, it never hurts to spend more time together while you still can.

Right now, she sits on the floor of your room reading while you work on a project for school. It's chemistry, never your strong suit, but you'd like to think you're doing alright. You're pretty sure that whatever Leda's reading is some kind of fairytale, always her favorite.

Then.

“What if I’m gone tomorrow?” Leda says. She says it as a joke, an offhand comment as if it’s just vaguely occurred to her while reading. You know it’s neither of those things.

“Well, you better call,” you reply, trying to keep your tone joking as well. There’s no response. You look up from your chemistry homework. Her face is screwed up like it gets when she’s trying not to cry. Silently, you get up, push your chair back from your desk and go sit on the floor next to your sister. She hugs you, and you both pretend to not be crying. In your mind, you’re not crying because you’re never going to see her again. You’ll just miss her when she’s gone, even if she’s only a call away.

She’s crying because she’s very confident that this is the last time she’ll ever see you.

Leda works at a florist, and has a girlfriend named Velia who works as a writer and loves riding horses, which is kind of hilarious, because Leda is terrified of horses. She and Velia have two other roommates, who are apparently also very good friends of hers. She’s very clearly built herself a life. A life that doesn’t have you in it.

“I’m happy,” she concludes. “Fuck, I thought I never would be, but I’m happy.” And somehow that hurts more than anything. Not that you haven’t seen your sister in five years, but that she spent at least some of those five years being happy.

“Did you even miss me?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course I did.”

“I thought —” you take a deep, shuddering breath. “I thought you’d still talk to me. I thought we’d keep in touch. Even when you left.”

“I didn’t know how to.”

“Didn’t know — Leda, you pick up the phone and call! You write a fucking letter! You knew how to contact me. You could have done it anytime.” You wanted to contact your sister so badly, but she had changed her number, she hadn’t left an address. You tried to track her down on social media, but you weren’t very good at it and she didn’t seem to have her own presence to begin with. Now you wondered if you could have pushed just a little harder and found her photos on Velia’s social media.

“I thought you’d be better off without me. I spent my whole life fucking things up, and you didn’t. I thought once there was no more shitty older sister around to worry about, you could move on with your life, go out there in the world and excel. I don’t really think of myself as a good person who makes others’ lives better, in case you hadn’t noticed. And I’m working on it. But I just didn’t want to infect you with my special brand of fucked up.”

You’re both crying now, angry tears running hotly down your face as Leda scrunches hers up in guilt, refusing to look you in the eye.

“You don’t fucking get to decide that for me.”

“I know.”

It was strange, when you suddenly became an only child. The house was so much emptier. So much quieter.

Your parents don’t get less strict. Somebody with a lower understanding of how your family functioned might have theorized that driving one kid away would be enough to make them ease up on the other. But parents who treated their children like projects meant to show off their successes would regard easing up on you as two failures instead of just one.

You followed their rules, because that was what you had always done. Just follow along with what your parents wanted, because you had a sister who thought she was protecting you by telling you to do that. And you thought she was trying to protect you too, but she left you behind. Ultimately, she chose herself, leaving you to be the supposed perfect child to two imperfect parents.

You start rebelling, in small ways. Making your own choices, wearing what you want to wear and doing what you want to do, but quietly. Never loudly, like Leda. It's a hollow victory, if it's a victory at all. You almost wish you were getting in trouble for it, but your parents just ignore you unless they can use you for something.

They tell people that Leda's abroad, and you wouldn't put it past them to eventually fake her death, just so she's no longer a blight on the family. They might have always wanted her gone, you think.

You never did.

The house is never less quiet.

Five years. Five years of being a little brother with no older sister. You spent weeks, months thinking she had to get back in touch with you eventually. Waiting patiently for a message that was never going to come. You went to therapy, although a good chunk of that was the ways in which your parents had messed you up, but the abandonment issues you developed about this were certainly touched on.

Would the message ever have come? If you hadn't just run into her by chance at a coffee shop, if you hadn't just lucked into living in the same city. Or would you have spent the rest of your life an only child?

“I’m sorry,” Leda says. You know she means it, because she never apologizes if she doesn’t mean it. It doesn’t really feel like enough.

“I’ll forgive you soon,” you reply. “If you’ll stick around.”

You see her start to smile, the edges of her mouth twitching up as she nods. “I can do that.”

She opens her arms for a hug. She’s not forgiven yet, you both know that. But it’s not worth it to lose more time. You still love her. She’s still your sister.

The choice is yours whether or not to hug her.



### **Woman Sleeping, Artist Unknown**

It was on loan from a private collection, allegedly. The museum was hesitant to say whose private collection it was, and the fact that so little was known about the statue implied that it hadn't necessarily been obtained by the most legal means.

Sabrina had received the invite to the unveiling from one of their art history professors, probably because they had talked a lot about their love for Renaissance sculpture and always looked attentive and nodded during class, which was all it really took to get a professor to like you, generally. They weren't even going to go originally, but their best friend/roommate, Gibson had pointed out that a statue unveiling seemed the type of event to have free food, and if Sabrina was very lucky, free alcohol. Gibson had a point. They were a broke college student, always swayed by the magical word "free". And maybe there were networking opportunities to be had, not that Sabrina loved the part of being an artist that was all about advertising yourself.

Most people at the unveiling were dressed to the nines in their best black tie, long gown looks. Sabrina was dressed in a simple rose-patterned sundress they had borrowed from their freshman year roommate and never returned. Said roommate had transferred at the end of the year, so Sabrina figured they were in the clear vis a vis having to return it. It was a nice outfit, but they still felt severely underdressed compared to the obviously wealthy museum donors. But the food was eons above anything their college dining hall could provide, and the bar was fortuitously open. So even if they were feeling distinctly out of place, at least they were accomplishing their original goal.

While the museum curators made their grand speeches about how lucky they were to be allowed to display this statue, Sabrina hovered by the buffet table. Just one peek, they figured. Go take a quick look and then cut their losses and head home.

There was a gasp from those assembled as the light sheet that had been covering it was pulled off the statue.

It was beautiful. Carved from fine marble, the statue depicted a young woman, curled into a sleeping position on her side. Her hands were clasped next to her chest, legs bent slightly. A light nightgown covered her body, the folds of fabric falling toward the floor. Her hair spread out around her head like a mass of vines. Her eyes were closed peacefully, but there was a slight furrow in her brow. She was almost unbelievably lifelike, like she was a real woman who had one day gone to sleep and then been encased within the stone. Sabrina was captivated, abandoning the buffet table to push their way through the crowd and stand next to the statue. They leaned over to look at the small plaque that identified her. Woman Sleeping, it said. Artist unknown.

There had to be more.

The professor that had sent Sabrina the invitation didn't have any more information on the statue, but promised to send it their way if anything else came up. The library was a bust as well, even though Sabrina checked out pretty much every book they could find on Renaissance sculpture. Woman Sleeping wasn't mentioned in any of them.

Gibson started acting worried around the third time they blew her off when she asked them to come get a sweet treat with her in order to continue reading one of the books or inputting different keywords into search engines to see if anything new would turn up.

“I get that it’s a cool statue, but normally when the artist’s been unknown for so many years, it stays that way,” she said, handing Sabrina a cookie she had written *This is an intervention!* on in pink icing.

“I don’t care who the artist is,” Sabrina tried to explain. “I want to know who she is.”

Gibson furrowed her brow, tilting her head in confusion. “She’s a statue. She’s not anyone.”

But Sabrina knew that wasn’t true. When they had looked at Woman Sleeping, they had felt something. A spark. A connection. She was someone, and only Sabrina could find out who.

“Are you in love with her or something?” Gibson joked. Sabrina ignored her, taking a bite from the intervention cookie and carefully bookmarking the article they had been scouring for later, when Gibson wasn’t paying attention to them anymore. They’d never been in love with a person, so the idea of them being in love with a statue was ridiculous. They were just curious. No, not curious. They were determined.

That night, Sabrina dreamed of a castle covered in thorns. In the dream, they had a sword in hand as they sliced through a never-ending torrent of constrictive greenery. After what felt like an eternity, they reached a chamber in which Woman Sleeping lay on a massive canopied bed. Unlike the last time Sabrina had seen her, she was built from flesh instead of stone, and her chest rose and fell gently as she slept. But it was Woman Sleeping. Every part of her was the same, just in vibrant color.

Sabrina had enough knowledge of fairytales to know what they were supposed to do next. But their feet felt like they were made of lead as they approached the bed, watching Woman Sleeping’s rhythmic breathing. In the fairytales, the prince woke the sleeping princess with a kiss. Sabrina was no prince. They reached out their hand to Woman Sleeping, placing it on her

warm, soft shoulder and shook her. Her eyelids fluttered as she began to stir from sleep, and Sabrina froze like they were the one made of stone.

Woman Sleeping smiled at Sabrina once her eyes opened. Unlacing her hands, she crooked a finger, gesturing for them to come closer. Sabrina leaned towards her at a glacial pace. Woman Sleeping cupped a hand to her mouth, brushing aside Sabrina's bobbed hair to whisper in their ear.

"My name is —"

Dreams always seem to end at the most inopportune times.

Two weeks had passed since Woman Sleeping had been revealed, and Sabrina was none the wiser to who she was. No book, nor article, nor webpage had any hint of information. In fact, it almost seemed that Woman Sleeping had simply not existed until the private collector had offered her up for loan. Sabrina was just about ready to give up.

There was a new message in their inbox. It was from a no-reply email address, and contained a link. Sabrina would have thought it was spam had it not been for the subject line.

*In regards to your questions about Woman Sleeping*

Gibson had a friend who worked in tech support. If their computer got a virus, they could go to him. They clicked the link.

It was an article, one that had obviously been scanned onto the internet, since it was from a 1937 newspaper. An interview with a sculptor. A woman named Maeve Adkins. Part of it jumped out to Sabrina.

*Woman Sleeping will be my last work. I am not well, and I suspect I will be taking a turn for the worse. I want to leave her behind, a sleeping sculpture with my likeness. That way, perhaps I will not truly die. Perhaps I will only be sleeping.*

It wasn't a dream. Or at least, it probably wasn't. Sabrina took Gibson to the museum to see Woman Sleeping, so she could understand what the whole thing was about in the first place. Gibson liked the statue, but she got distracted and wandered off, leaving Sabrina still staring.

The more Sabrina stared, the more it looked like Maeve was breathing. She was made of stone, but there was color in her cheeks. Sabrina always followed the rules of art galleries, even as a child. They were respectful of the art. They didn't touch. But still, they felt their arm reach out, just like in the dream. It was fine. There was no one else in the room. No guards, no other patrons to see and judge. Just Sabrina, gently placing their hand on Maeve's warm shoulder, and shaking her awake.

The stone beneath their fingertips turns to flesh. The colors of Maeve's dream self spread throughout the marble. The statue, the woman, the artist. She takes a breath.

## **What You're Not Supposed to Know**

It takes twelve showers until Lexie starts feeling clean again, and even then she's not confident that she's gotten all the blood out of her hair.

They keep asking her questions, really just the same question over and over. "What happened out there?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. I survived."

There's only one true statement there, and it's the one she wishes was a lie.

*She can still remember the first corpse, a boy Claudia had been teasingly saying was making eyes at her. Strung up, cut to shreds. A corner of his skin peeling off like an old book. He didn't have any eyes left.*

Her hair is still wet from the last shower, and she is dressed in a soft, plain t-shirt and gray sweatpants. They tried to get rid of her Camp Starlake t-shirt, soaked in blood and gore and she screamed and screamed until they let her keep it, probably unwilling to upset the only witness they had. Not like they'd even believe what she had witnessed.

*You could tell his vocal cords were severed. Even if he had been alive, there was no way the voice could have come from the body. The frantic chanting. As above, so below. The Restless must rest. What did it mean? Why the fuck was everyone dead?*

The woman in front of her isn't from one of the familiar law enforcement authorities she's been talking to. She wears a more colorful suit too, one that almost shimmers in some lights if Lexie lets her eyes glaze enough. She introduces herself as Agent Nguyen.

"With the Federal Taskforce of Paranormal Investigation. They tell me you don't remember anything."

“Paranormal,” Lexie says. “That’s one word for it.”

*Lexie had never even really wanted to be a camp counselor. Sure, she had fond childhood memories of Camp Starlake, but most of those were really more just fond childhood memories of Claudia. Claudia, on the other hand, was the type of girl who was completely built for summer camp. She had begged and pleaded with Lexie.*

*“C’m on, it’ll be no fun to be a counselor if you aren’t there too!”*

*She wouldn’t change her yes to a no, knowing what she did now. Claudia was built for summer camp. She wasn’t built to survive. Better to have a few more memories.*

Agent Nguyen is frustratingly vague, even when Lexie gives her every detail she can. She won’t tell her who the Restless are, or what it is that killed everyone, only that she should continue declining to comment to the public as a whole.

“I saw eleven people die, including my best friend and the best you can give me for what happened out there is telling me to keep my trap shut? That’s bullshit!”

*She knew it was supernatural pretty quickly, there was no way any human could have done that to the bodies. Still, coming face to face with that...thing, that mound of rotting corpses twisted and gnarled into the shape of a man...it was still enough to make her want to empty the contents of her stomach.*

*She shouldn’t have survived it. That thing wasn’t the type of thing you were meant to survive.*

“I’m sorry, Miss Campbell, but that’s all I can give you.”

“I’m just going to keep looking for answers, you know,” Lexie says, surprising herself. She hadn’t known that until she had started speaking. Now she’s said it though, she knows it’s true. She has to know what that was. She has to stop it from coming back.

Agent Nguyen gives a world-weary sigh. “Listen, I’m not supposed to do this, but the Spellcasting Society of North America might be more willing to answer your questions. I can give you the card for my main contact there. But you shouldn’t call them if you’re not one hundred percent sure. My advice is to stay away from this world. Go back to being normal.”

*Lexie was never normal. Claudia, who was popular and friendly and liked everything a normal girl should like, was. She spent at least an hour on her makeup and hair every single day, she listened to Madonna and had a crush on John Taylor from Duran Duran. Lexie liked Madonna too, but in the way that Claudia liked John Taylor.*

*And Lexie liked Claudia. Claudia, whose mangled, strung up corpse she had seen only a day ago. Claudia, whose severed hand she still has, tucked into the pocket of her jacket. Claudia, who yelled at her because she rightly guessed that despite the terrible situation they were in, Lexie was kind of having fun being the one who knew what to do, not the sidekick for once.*

*She owes it to Claudia to stop what happened to her from happening to anything else.*

She takes the card.