

couldn't remember the last time she'd danced like this. She was sweaty and her feet would be sore tomorrow and she didn't care, not one bit. Jesse felt electric. She felt like a different person. No one here knew her, not a soul. She could give any name, she realized. Pretend to be anyone she liked. It was too tempting not to try it. She went to the bar, hadn't even opened her mouth to shout her order when a woman with a buzz cut and about a dozen face piercings cut in and said she would pay for this one. Jesse introduced herself as Miriam, and okay, maybe it was fucked up to use her mother's name, but she panicked. Anyway, it wasn't like Jesse had ever even met her; it was Jesse's middle name, too. The woman said her name was Cairo, and Jesse said she loved Cairo, that she'd been there twice and wanted to go back as soon as she could. Ten minutes later they were in the bathroom, stumbling into the accessible stall in a gasping tangle of limbs. Some good-girl impulse in the back of Jesse's mind protested that they shouldn't do this. What if someone needed to use this stall? What if they got caught and thrown out? Sex in a bathroom in a club was probably illegal. Wasn't it? She'd never really done anything illegal before, apart from some underage drinking—and that didn't really count, did it, if it was from your aunt's wine cellar? But it was all so stereotypically, deliciously grimy. She justified it in her mind: Jesse might not have ever done more than a little handsy making out back in college, might never have broken any rule that mattered, but Miriam didn't have any problem with any of this. A good enough excuse: the truth was, she was so turned on she *ached* and she wanted this. She wanted this very, very much. So she let Cairo maneuver her, get her pressed up against the wall face-first. She moaned—a high, needy, startled sound—and heard a soft snicker from the next stall over. God, it was filthy. People must be able to hear them, to see their feet beneath the stall. What was she fucking *doing*? But Cairo tapped Jesse's lower lip with the tip of her index finger and whispered, "Open up, baby girl," and Jesse's brain shorted out completely. She did as she

had talked so long her throat was raw when she called Maharet that night and told her she'd found someone else, someone like her, someone who could understand. A friend, a friend, finally a friend.

They paused after that memory so Jesse could look him up. Ian's Facebook page had been converted to a memorial. Pancreatic cancer, in 2021. Maharet must have simply erased his memories, too, and let him live out his life. Small mercies.

The ninth memory was immediately overwhelming: darkness punctuated by flashing multicolored lights, throbbing music so loud she could feel it in her teeth, a thicket of bodies dancing all around her. A club—and not a usual night, no. The outfits were too outrageous, the crowd too varied, the joy so thick in the air Jesse could taste it. A delightfully tacky banner on the wall read "PRIDE NIGHT 2009!!!!".

Her first one. She almost hadn't come. A mass email invitation, forwarded on the Columbia LGBTQ listserv she was still subscribed to despite having graduated two years ago. She'd chatted with Maharet that afternoon on the phone, agonizing over it. She didn't think she was going to go. She wasn't going to go. Was she just a homebody, or could it be internalized homophobia? She didn't know. Should she go, see if she could meet a few other queer people, make friends? But who made friends at a club? Maybe lots of people—Jesse didn't know. She didn't really do clubs. She didn't really do friends.

And yet here she was—in a club. It had been an impulsive thing when she changed her mind. She'd gotten dressed in a whirlwind of excitement. Sheer dark tights, her biggest stompiest black boots, and a 90s-style babydoll dress. Jesse hadn't worn it once since she bought it; she loved the floral pattern—pink ruffled blossoms on a black background—the loose softness of the skirt, the way it looked on her body. But it was so *short*. Nothing compared to so many of the outfits on display in this club, but still considerably more risqué than her usual.

But she'd put it on. She'd done her hair up in a messy bun, slapped on a little mascara, taken a brave breath, and she'd actually showed up.

Hard to imagine all that doubt and fear, now. She

her words. What he sounded like *when*, exactly? Armand got to his feet, nearly knocking the chair over in his haste. He had to catch it to keep it from falling; strange, to see him clumsy. Jesse hadn't quite noticed how smooth and elegant all his movements were until he stopped being able to maintain it. "I have to—excuse me. I need a moment." Armand didn't leave so much as flee, pausing only to grab the keycard on his way out. Jesse looked at Rashid, who was staring at the closed door with naked anxiety. "Is he angry?" Jesse asked. He didn't seem angry, exactly, but she could think of no alternatives. With difficulty, Rashid tore his gaze away. He smiled at Jesse, tight and joyless. "Maybe a little. But Jesse didn't know what that meant. She merely looked at Rashid, waiting. He sighed. "It's—he reacted like that because of things that have nothing to do with you. I'm sorry, I can't explain any more without betraying his trust, and I'm not going to do that." An unspeoken 'again' in the air. Rashid looked so pained. He kept glancing back to the door, like he was waiting for Armand to come back through it already. Jesse hoped she hadn't caused a problem between them. She'd been putting Rashid through so much, hadn't she? Jesse walked around the table, dropping down into the chair Armand had vacated and throwing her arms around Rashid. She hugged him tight, her voice muffled against his shoulder as she said, "Don't apologize for being a good person." Rashid settled his arms around her and rested his cheek against the top of her head. "I'm not going to lie, Jesse. I don't understand how you can defend her like that, after what Armand told me. I might not know your aunt, but I—can see how hurt you are, and it's hard for me to excuse that just because she was nice to you when you were a lonely, vulnerable kid, and she buys you nice coats sometimes." Jesse flinched. Rashid, the ever-observant. He'd noticed Jesse zoning out when she touched the fur

lining of her coat yesterday and had extrapolated—correctly—that it must be a gift from Maharet. Of course, he had worked it out. Jesse was glad she hadn't told him about the other memory that had bubbled up at that time. It didn't exactly reflect very well on Maharet, did it? Giving Jesse a mink coat, because she knew how much she enjoyed the feeling of fur, because she used to...she used to...

Jesse cut off the thought there.

Rashid sighed.

"But it doesn't really matter what I think, does it? If it helps *you* to tell me that she did good stuff too, then okay. Now I know she did good stuff too. I won't forget it."

He paused, added with grim humor, "Or will I? Who knows."

"Stop!" Jesse choked on a tiny laugh, pulling away and covering her mouth with her hand. It must be some kind of magic, the fact that he could still make her feel better, in the midst of all this, "You can't make me laugh about that, it's so fucked up."

"I know," he agreed.

A beep from the card reader and Armand slipped back into the suite. All signs of his distress had been smoothed away; he carried himself as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened. Like he'd just stepped outside to take a call.

"I believe I now understand why your aunt's eyes keep changing color," he said, before Rashid or Jesse could ask if he was alright. All smooth, authoritative detachment. Jesse and Rashid exchanged a single glance, but neither of them called him on it. "Before, I believed it must be simply a more pronounced version of something not uncommon in vampires. For some of us, the shade of the iris fluctuates. You may have noticed."

He made a loose little gesture at his own face; Jesse saw that his eyes were a tawny, warm brown. Quite different to the vivid orange they'd been mere minutes earlier.

"But now I am convinced this is something else. I believe Maharet's own eyes have been removed."

Jesse frowned, "Wouldn't she heal? Rashid said something about vampires having super healing."

Assistive technology?" "Probably offensive to call it that, sir," Rashid said, very firmly. "Ah," Armand nodded once, an acknowledgment. Jesse wondered if this was an established pattern between them: Rashid pointing out Armand's cultural mis-steps and Armand adjusting accordingly. She was curious about that. It wasn't the only thing she was curious about. She waited until Armand turned his back to catch Rashid's gaze and mouth "sir" at him, raising her eyebrows suggestively. He flushed and looked away, and wasn't that interesting? Jesse would have to tease him about it, when her life wasn't falling apart. It took eight memories for them to reach a particularly bad one. Three of those were purely practical; Maharet covering for slips of the tongue, quelling Jesse when she pointed out misaligned details. One was another memory of Neda; holding hands and talking through a farmer's market, talking and talking *time, to hold all of your kale, you monster*. She remembered now that Neda always liked to tease her for loving kale. Jesse knew that for next time had meant "I want to come here every Sunday together, both of us, just like this?" In the other four memories, all knotted together, was a friendship cut short before it could take root. A tour guide named Ian, back when Jesse still worked at the British Museum. He was almost twenty years older than her, but Jesse couldn't have cared less. He actually enjoyed talking about archaeology with her. They'd gone to get lunch for the first time outside of work; a particularly disruptive ghost had wandered into the restaurant, wailing and spitting out gouts of congealed blood. It put her off her dumpings, but she pretended not to see it as well as she could. . . until she noticed Ian's eyes fitting over to the ghost, once or twice. She'd plucked up the courage to ask, in a very small voice, if he could see it, too; after that, they'd talked for hours and hours. Pouring out stories from two lifetimes' worth of encounters with spirits. The worst ones they'd seen, the funniest, the strangest. Jesse

was told and sucked on the three fingers Cairo fed her with relish. She wasn't really sure if she was doing it right or how much her tongue was supposed to be involved, but she was having the time of her life, and she wasn't hearing any complaints.

"You want me to fuck you?"

Cairo's other hand found its way under her dress and ran along her slit, tucked away under the tights and her underwear. She was hopelessly wet, Cairo could probably feel it, could probably fucking *hear* it as she pressed harder, sliding her fingers back and forth, tracing her through the fabric. Jesse ground down against it, moaning against Cairo's fingers and nodding so vigorously some of her hair dislodged itself from her half-collapsed bun. *Yes, fuck me, please, make me come, wreck me—*

She wanted to say the words, as Cairo slipped the fingers from her mouth and tugged the strap of her dress off her shoulder, but she couldn't make herself. Surely Cairo would know she was a fraud, if she started trying to dirty talk. She'd managed to slip under the radar this far, to seem fun and rebellious and sexy and not like a virgin who would talk for hours about different Mesopotamian pottery traditions and why they all mattered so very, very much. Cairo hauled the strap down low enough to expose Jesse's breast and then got to rolling Jesse's nipple between her thumb and forefinger with easy, practiced movements. Jesse squeaked—loud, much too loud. She covered her mouth with her hand, her ears burning, her face burning, her whole body alight.

"Oh, you're a sensitive one, aren't you? That's cute."

Cairo sounded smug and condescending and so sure; Jesse was afraid she was going to come before she even got her tights off if she kept talking like that. She nodded again, feeling some muscle tucked away deep inside her clench, needy and begging for more. She wanted Cairo to finger her; she wanted to ride her face; she wanted to see if there were any more piercings tucked away on her; she wanted to hear what noises she would make when Jesse got her tongue on her. She wanted and wanted and wanted, mindless and exuberant.

"I have never once in my life used the phrase 'super healing,'" Rashid pointed out. Armand shrugged, "Vampires heal differently to mortals, yes, but we have our limits. I believe the removal happened while she was still human." At the dumfounded look on Jesse's face, he explained, "If, while I was still alive, someone had taken an axe and cut off my hand, I would not spontaneously regrow a new one once I was turned. A vampire's body remains frozen in its precise state at the moment of transformation, down to the tiniest hair, or freckle, or scar." He had reached the table by that point and leaned his hip against the back of the chair Rashid was sitting in. As he said that last part, Jesse just saw, in the corner of her vision, Rashid reach over and brush the curled knuckles of his hand against Armand's thigh. It was a tiny, private gesture: not meant for her eyes. Armand must have a scar there; Rashid must remember just where it was. She pretended not to have seen. "However, there are ways of affecting temporary alterations. I have seen it done before. If, in my handless state, I was to kill a mortal, sever *his* hand, wound my own wrist, and join the two together, my body would make the best of it. It would knit the two together and animate the replacement through the power of my vampiric blood. But these solutions are always very temporary. A few weeks, a few months, depending on the strength of the blood. After that, the mortal flesh would begin to deteriorate." Jesse shuddered at the thought. "If this is what Maharet has been doing," Armand concluded, "she must be obtaining regular replacements." "So... your theory is she's killing people and stealing their eyes for herself, over and over?" Jesse swallowed against a wave of nausea; she didn't want it to be true, but the evidence was in her head. Overlapping mental images of Maharet. Blue eyes, hazel eyes, green eyes, brown eyes, gray eyes—every possible shade, she could picture perfectly in her aunt's face, because she had seen it. "We know she did, once," Armand said, softly. "It's a kind of—what's the word they use for it, nowadays?"

cleared it carefully and went on.

"I *have* had a good life thanks to her. Not just because she paid for things, either. She encouraged me, no matter what stupid hobby I was getting into. She taught me about art, and literature, and history. She—wrote me letters, every week, even before I was old enough to read them, from all over the world. Thinking about *me*. Caring about *me*. She inspired me to be curious, and—and believe in myself. She listened to me whenever I needed someone to talk to. She was my best friend. She actually *believed* me, about the ghosts, and told me I didn't have to be afraid of them. The letter she wrote me, after I confessed that I could see them... I carried it around with me for two years, everywhere I went, just so I could read it if I needed to."

Jesse sighed, frustrated by the inadequacy of words to convey the reality of Maharet's role in her life.

"She loved me. She—loves me. And that's important. It's not fair, to throw all of that out, just because—"

Belatedly, Jesse realized she'd started scratching at one of the tattoos behind her ears. She forced her hand away; she kept doing that this morning. The skin was starting to get hot and irritated from it, which only made her want to scratch more.

"—just because she—a few times she—"

"You can't even say it, can you?" Armand interrupted.

He was hunched forward in his chair, curling inward, his arms wrapped tight around his chest. His hair had fallen in a curtain around his face, blocking it from view, but his voice was tight and strained. Like he was trying not to cry.

"Is this what I sound like?" he whispered.

She had played this out in her mind multiple times while she was showering, anticipating possible outcomes. She'd imagined pity. She'd imagined disagreements. She'd imagined anger.

But this... she didn't even know what *this* was.

Armand looked up at Rashid, a pleading expression on his face. His eyes were vivid, electric orange. The question had been for him, Jesse realized. She replayed it in her head: *Is this what I sound like?* Drawing a comparison between himself and Jesse, distraught by

Maharet tugged her scrunchie free, never once faltering with her other hand. She shook Jesse's hair loose and leaned forward, burying her face in the curls. Jesse could feel her kissing the long red spill of it, over and over, reverently. Breathing into it as she rubbed faster. Two things were happening at once in Jesse's body. She felt the pressure building inside, that familiar tightening and liquid heat of an impending orgasm. She felt it, but it was not her. Some connection, some tether had worked its way loose. The body feeling those things wasn't her anymore. She'd become like one of the spirits she'd seen all her life; insubstantial, unreal. She was a separate thing. Maharet didn't seem to realize it. Jesse hoped she wouldn't notice.

"I'm going to look after you. From now on, I'm going to make sure you always get what you need, so you don't put yourself at risk anymore. That way no one will hurt you."

You're the one hurting me, Jesse thought.

She could feel the air against the slowly drying cheek of the body that her aunt Maharet was touching. The body wasn't crying anymore; Maharet didn't seem to care one way or the other. She kissed her way down the body's neck, over the curve of its shoulder, dipping her head down to mouth at its exposed breast. Jesse saw the fangs. They didn't surprise her, those predator teeth. She didn't know why.

Maharet gave a tiny, shivery exhale of delight before she bit down on the soft swell of flesh. As she sucked out the blood in slow, noisy gulps, the body shuddered and twitched, whimpering its way through an orgasm. Jesse hadn't ever made those noises when she touched herself in bed. They were filthy—something from a fantasy, something from a porno. The body was left weak-kneed and trembling, full of tingling. All wonderful heat. Did that mean Maharet was right? All those things she'd said about Jesse were true, and she was only doing this for her own good...?

Maharet licked and licked at the two puncture marks, vivid red dots just to the side of that nipple. They closed up, somehow. Between one swipe of Maharet's tongue and the next, the wounds were gone. Satisfied, Maharet pulled away and resettled the strap.

hole she'd sliced into the tights and yanked. The tear gaped wider, the harsh sound of the ripping fabric unmistakable and awful.

"I didn't lie, I d-didn't, I just changed my mind, I changed my mind, I forgot to tell you, it wasn't on purpose, I promise." Jesse's breath hitched, but she tried to keep the sobs at bay. She jerked away when Maharet's fingers sought her out again, trying to slip back inside, but there wasn't anywhere for her to go. Jesse stuttered, "P-please stop doing that. I don't like that."

"I shouldn't have been surprised. I let myself forget, too often, who your mother was."

Maharet was rougher this time, as she shoved her fingers into Jesse's cunt. It spasmed around them, little involuntary clench of pleasure. Maharet laughed; Jesse stopped trying not to cry.

"She was a slut, and now you're a slut. Fitting that you use her name, while opening your legs for any random stranger that calls you pretty. Nature winning the race over nurture yet again, much to my disappointment. I thought I had taught you better, but apparently *not*."

Such disgust in her voice, as she pulled her fingers free from Jesse and smeared them across her cheek, leaving a wide streak of slick fluid behind them. Evidence of her perversion, her disgrace. Jesse whimpered—a tiny, animal sound that Maharet ignored. She stuck her hand up under Jesse's dress again and set to rubbing her clit, tight little circles that sent jolts along Jesse's nerves.

"I'm sorry, Maharet, please don't, please—"

"It was a mistake, thinking you could look after yourself without supervision. Here you are, a grown woman who should know better, putting yourself in a dangerous situation in mere service to your libido. Do you have any idea what could happen to you in a place like this? You could be robbed. You could be murdered. You could be raped."

Jesse flinched. One more awful realization pierced through the panic: *that's what is happening to me.*

"It's not safe. I'm not going to let you end up hurt the way she was. I love you too much, Jesse. I love you."

chapter seven shame

They lay in each other's arms, she and Maharet, and Maharet's hard skin warmed and softened so that they became one wet and tangled thing, hair enmeshed, Jesse's face buried in Maharet's neck as she gnawed at the fount, as one shock of ecstasy passed through her after another.

- *Queen of the Damned*

She slept for eleven hours and did not dream.

By the time she woke up, Rashid had already gone to the Motherhouse and returned again. He had borrowed her keys—"I thought you wouldn't mind"—and brought back a change of clothes, her toothbrush, and bagels from her favorite deli. Not just random clothes, either: it was an outfit that she frequently wore when she knew she was going to be in the library translating all day and wanted to be comfortable. The exact right combination of leggings, shirt, sweater. Even the socks she usually paired with it—thick ones, since the library was always colder than she liked.

Now and then, Rashid's eye for detail intimidated her. Jesse didn't envy Armand finding out he had been secretly observing him for years. She didn't like to imagine all the things he'd noticed about her over the months.

Jesse left Rashid and Armand talking quietly at the table in the suite's dining area as she went about getting ready for the day. What a difference it made—sleep, food in her stomach, a shower, clean teeth, a change of clothes. Jesse returned to join them with her wet hair pulled over one shoulder, weaving it into a neat side braid.

"I said you had a vision and we're off investigating it in Barton-upon-Humber, by the way. I told them we wouldn't be back for a couple days, at earliest." Rashid smiled up at her, "Which is a terrible lie, but that was the whole point. They think we're madly in love and hiding it badly."

There was the tiniest touch of contempt in his voice; Jesse couldn't blame him. The secrecy around

much stronger than her pride.

—*Yes, please.*

But at that moment, her desire for oblivion was need more vampiric interference in her brain.

own; he was already helping her so much; she didn't want to refuse. She would drift off eventually on her own, he thought for a while. Some stubborn part of her

—*Would you like me to make you sleep? I can.*

—*Yeah?*

—*Jesse.*

didn't wake Rashid. That was the important thing. —her tiny hitching breaths were unmistakable—but she tears overflowed. She knew Armand could still hear her chest. She tried to stay as quiet as she could, as the her earlier hysterical laughter; it dislodged something in that Jesse could not stifle a giggle. It was different from Armand's voice was so crisp and prim in her head

—*Apology accepted.*

sex tonight and I ruined it.

Jesse didn't understand what the sound was at first, when Cairo's body hit the floor. Too many changes happened all at once for her to process them. Those hands were no longer on her; Cairo fell down hard, laid still and unmoving on the floor of the bathroom stall; the muffled rhythmic thumping of the music from the club cut out; the sound of chatter and of running taps and of hand dryers also vanished, leaving a silence so shocking it felt like a slap. Jesse had only managed to turn halfway around before different hands were pressing her up against the wall again. No, *showing* her against it. Jesse gasped, half in confusion, half in pain. She tried to twist her head, to see who was doing it, but fingers tangled tight into her hair and kept her face mashed into the sick painted metal. The silence was so complete, so alien: not a single noise apart from Jesse's frantic panting, and the sound of taut fabric ripping. Jesse only realized it must have been her tight tights when her underwear was tugged aside and two cold fingers pushed deep inside her. Cold fingers. Cold fingers. She knew those fingers. She knew—

"Why did you lie to me, Jesse?" Maharet said. Jesse shuddered at the sound of her voice. Shuddered as Maharet started fucking those fingers into her. So much quiet fury in her voice, but her thrusts were slow, almost tender. It was an easy slide, hardly any friction at all—she'd been so wet, so ready for it, her body all soft and receptive.

"You told me you weren't coming here tonight. You seemed so worried it was because you were ashamed of yourself. I was going to drop by and surprise you. Bring the celebration to you. Tell you how proud I am of the woman you've become."

As the worst of the initial shock faded, Jesse began to understand what was happening. It hit her in waves; discrete realizations, one after another. Maharet was here. Maharet was angry. Maharet's hand was under her dress. Maharet was fucking her. She shouldn't be doing that. Jesse didn't want her to be doing that.

"Imagine my surprise when I arrived just in time to see you trot out the door in this."

Maharet pulled her fingers free, seized the ragged

of the dress back where it belonged. Once again, no visual evidence of what had happened; the residue on the face covered by all that curling hair, the tear in the tights hidden under the fall of the skirt.

"You're going to go home," Maharet commanded, and the words weren't just words. They were a hand around her throat. Maharet shouldn't be able to do that when Jesse was just a ghost. She shouldn't have been able to touch her when she was like this. But she was doing it, and it was awful, and there was nowhere else to go, no deeper place to sink. "You're going to throw these clothes away and you're going to remember spending the night alone at home. With your shame."

"Yes," said the body, said Jesse.

"You will forget this."

By the time the last word reached her ears, she already had.

"Come with me," Armand said when the memory ended. Jesse got up and went.

He led her to the suite's bathroom. Jesse watched as he turned on the tap, testing the temperature with his fingers, waiting for it to run hot before he set the stopper in the bottom of the sink. As it slowly filled, he unzipped a small cloth bag and began looking for something in it. Jesse watched him. She knew where she was, what was happening, but the untethered feeling had not stayed where it belonged in the memory. It had stowed away, followed her out.

Armand pulled out a sleek white tube with small silvery lettering she couldn't be bothered to read.

"This was a gift from Louis—from my love. I'm sure Rashid has mentioned him."

He unscrewed the cap with careful movements, continuing to speak as he did, "It's my favorite soap in the world. It smells just like honeysuckle, and the foam is astonishingly thick." He pulled down one of the nearly-folded washcloths hanging on the towel rack and dipped it in the water. "I thought it might make you feel better, to wash your face."

"A little late," Jesse said dully.

Thirteen years since that memory. She could feel it as if it happened seconds ago; Maharet's fingers smearing the evidence of her lust onto her face, making

Rashid's last assignment meant that very few of their colleagues knew the kind of long-term, high-stakes subterfuge he was capable of. It must get tiring, being underestimated because of it.

There was never going to be a better moment than this. Jesse drew in a deep breath and dove in.

"I want to say something. Before we get started again."

Armand and Rashid both looked at her; Jesse felt heat spreading across her cheeks and did her best to ignore it. It wasn't embarrassment, exactly—she wouldn't know what name to give the feeling. Dark little curl of hair, steadily dripping onto her leggings. "I know it's—it's really bad, all the stuff you saw or—heard about last night. I'm not saying it isn't." Rashid's posture changed, went stiff and tense. He must sense where this was headed; Jesse ignored it. "But the thing is, you're only seeing—the awful stuff. The worst stuff. The stuff that she—" Jesse swallowed. Flicked at the end of her braid. She'd been thinking ever since she woke up how she was going to word it, "—that she was too ashamed of to let me remember."

A hissing intake of breath: had that been Rashid, or Armand? It didn't really matter. She had to speed up, or they weren't going to let her finish.

"This isn't like yesterday, I'm not... denying it happened or blaming nonexistent shapeshifters, but—you don't know her, either of you. You don't know how much she's done for me. And I think, I just think, you need that context, or it's not fair."

She could feel the weight of their eyes on her; she'd known it would be like this. That was exactly why it was so important that she say it.

"I have her to thank for my whole life. I can't imagine who I'd be if it wasn't for her. I didn't have anything when she found me. My mom died in a car crash while she was pregnant with me, but I survived. I was in the hospital for weeks. No one came for me. No one even named me. I wasn't—I was nothing. I didn't have any name and a life. A good life."

Her voice cracked on that last sentence. She

the very least."

Jesse didn't know if he'd been hearing her thoughts, or if he merely guessed at their direction. Either way, Armand's voice was softer as he added, "I'll keep watch. No unwanted visitors."

Jesse rubbed at her eyes and tried very hard to pretend they weren't hot with tears. It was only a temporary solution; she knew that. But it meant she could be safe for tonight. For one night, at least.

"D-don't sleep on the couch, Rashid. That's *stupid*. This bed could fit, like, seven people in it."

"Ten, if you got creative," Armand agreed.

She ended up choosing Rashid's clothes, sweater holes and all. The silk pajamas Armand had pulled from his suitcase looked too expensive to touch even to Jesse, who had grown up with plenty of luxury to go around.

Rashid insisted upon her eating at least one of his ever-present protein bars, after which she slipped between the sheets and closed her eyes. She felt the mattress dip when Rashid joined her, heard the click as Armand shut off the lights.

Jesse stayed curled on her side, listening as Rashid's breathing became slow hardly a minute later. She opened her eyes again.

Armand had settled himself on the nearby couch, his legs crossed, a book open in his lap. Reading in the dark was evidently not an issue for a vampire.

Tentatively, Jesse thought in what felt like his direction:

—*Is he asleep already? That's nuts.*

It must have worked because Armand lifted his head. She could just make out his soft smile in the dim moonlight filtering in through the window

—*It really is quite the skill, isn't it?*

Jesse shut her eyes and tried to follow suit. There really was an ocean of room in the bed between them. Rashid must have picked this suite thinking Jesse's memory would take an hour or two to sort out, and that he and Armand would have plenty of time after to make use of this ludicrously big bed.

Jesse was ragged with exhaustion and it made her inhibitions lower than they perhaps ought to have been.

—*Sorry if you guys were planning on having crazy*

he had only realized right at that instant that he might be in danger. Armand seemed utterly unsurprised by the possibility.

“At the time, I thought... I thought she didn’t want

me to be close to anybody else. Like she was annoyed

I’d made my first friend. I thought that, but then... we

talked more, and I convinced myself I’d been wrong.”

“She convinced you,” Armand said.

Jesse shrugged. Another distinction that hardly

seemed to matter. Maharet leading; Jesse allowing

herself to be led. How much of this could have been

prevented, if she’d been just a little harder to control?

She’d never really given Maharet a challenge, had she?

Those silly questions on the phone. As if that amounted

to anything. She hadn’t really fought back in any way

that mattered. Not against the manipulation; not against

the other things. Happy little lamb, trotting placidly

along to the slaughter.

“Maybe it’s not too late to save Rashid. Maybe I

can text her right now and say we had a fight. No,

maybe not a fight. That still sounds too invested. I can

say... I got bored of him. Tell her how lonely I am and

how much I miss her. Maybe that’ll be enough to keep

her from hurting him.”

A hysterical giggle bubbled up in Jesse’s throat.

“Maybe she’ll come to visit.”

You needed that badly, didn’t you? I’m sorry. I

Jesse giggled again.

“No one is hurting Rashid,” Armand said, very

firmly, over the sick hiccupy sound of her laughter.

“And it would be incredibly unwise to contact your

aunt in the state that you’re in.”

she?

Armand clearly thought so, because he shot her an

assessing look and then brought his hands together, a

soft decisive clap.

“We’re done—”

Jesse opened her mouth to argue that they’d

already talked about this, *multiple* times, that she

wasn’t going to stop until all her memories were

restored. But Armand wasn’t finished speaking.

—for the night. We can resume in the morning.

For now, you need food and sleep. You’ve lived through multiple days’ worth of memories in the space of a few hours. Your brain needs time to sort through it all and to restore its—what’s that word?”

This last question to Rashid; it was clearly a topic they’d discussed before, because Rashid had the answer ready right away, “Plasticity.”

“Yes, its plasticity. If we continue on without a break, I fear our returns will only diminish from here.”

Obnoxious of him, to make an argument that was both reasonable and utterly impersonal. He was not saying that she was not strong enough to keep going—merely pointing out that human brains required sleep in order to function.

Jesse’s head *did* hurt quite badly, she realized. She didn’t feel hungry, but she recognized that the trembly weakness in her limbs was probably at least partly low blood sugar. It made sense. Go back to the Motherhouse, have a late meal, get a good night’s rest, come back tomorrow. Nothing to be gained by doing it all in one day.

Except that the thought of returning to her rooms filled her with terror. She still owned the sheets that had been on her bed in that first memory. She’d recognized the fabric. Were they on her bed right now? She couldn’t remember. She was going to have to donate them to a charity shop. She was never going to be able to sleep on those ever again.

How many times had Maharet come to her, while those diamond-patterned sheets were on her bed? She thought back, let her mind gently touch that memory in a way that she hadn’t when she was desperately denying the truth. It had been a passing siren on the street that woke her up enough to realize something was happening. A random, rare coincidence.

How many times had she *not* woken up? No memory even made to hide away. Had it happened on every set of sheets that she owned? In every apartment she’d ever lived in? Was this why Maharet had bought that townhouse when she was in college? For easier access? What about the Motherhouse? The living quarters were hardly high-security. Maharet could simply erase herself from anyone’s memory if she were caught sneaking in. When was the last time it had

But who was this woman Maharet, who had always been Jesse’s distant but ever attentive mentor, who guided her studies with frequent and thoughtful letters, who gave her the personal direction to which she so productively responded and which she secretly craved? - Queen of the Damned

chapter eight
gifts

was the first thing she felt, after.

They made progress.

It was only three memories later that they came in across another rape. Maharet had come to visit Jesse in Jericho at the archaeological dig she’d underwritten. In the memory, Jesse believed it had been five years since she last saw her aunt when they parted in Sonoma. How many false firsts had there been between them? Had Maharet liked it, being able to re-experience Jesse’s shocked delight at seeing her over and over again? When Jesse first spotted her, she’d raced across the dig site and launched herself into her aunt’s arms, all dignity forgotten. Maharet had kissed her face over and over, squeezed her tight in her arms, called her *my child, my lovely child*.

As soon as Jesse told her colleagues who Maharet was, they insisted on a celebration back at their campsite. Dinner, drinks, dessert, more drinks; Jesse didn’t even notice Maharet not touching her plate. It was so wonderful just to see her, to be near her. Jesse babbled at her like an overexcited child; she felt herself talking too much and too loudly, kept apologizing for it. Each time, Maharet stroked her hair, or touched her chin, and said it was good to see her so happy.

Jesse was happy. She drank too much, became giggly, and ended up in the tent that some of the assistants had set up for Maharet during her visit. Not as comfortable as the more permanent lodgings Jesse shared with half a dozen others, but Maharet said she would be more than comfortable enough. She brushed Jesse’s hair and then, when Jesse said her head was starting to spin, made her lay down on the camp bed and fed her bites of halva. That had planted the first tiny seed of nauseous dread; something about the way

light fixture on the ceiling. But from that point on, it was small fridge or feel the duvet beneath her or see the any more than she could hear the hum of the suite's. She couldn't feel it during any of the memories, between both of his, secure and warm.

permission by giving Rashid her hand. He folded it throat was too tight to speak, so she granted her vanished; Jesse blinked rapidly, overwhelmed. Her

Whatever was left of that awful numbness inside her. Hesitantly, he held out a hand towards hers. "Can I—?"

"I know—I know you won't be able to feel it, but herself once more into the usual place. Rashid perched near her on the bed as she settled

"It's okay," she reassured, "I'm okay." Rashid looked so worried when they returned that Jesse knew Armand must have told him about it

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

"It's okay," she reassured, "I'm okay." Rashid looked so worried when they returned that Jesse knew Armand must have told him about it

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

telepathically. It really was unbearable, seeing him this upset. He looked younger, vulnerable. Jesse managed a tiny smile.

her aunt watched her, as she placed the morsels directly on her tongue. Something about her eyes as she did it.

The memory became patchy and incomplete after that—all that wine, doing Maharet's work for her. Blurred impressions of messy urgent kisses, of turning her face away. Of Maharet gripping her chin and turning it back. Fragments of sensations: Maharet's bare breasts against hers, the weight of her, the slickness of sweat between their bodies. Nausea. The too-sweet aftertaste of the halva mixed with something coppery. The wet heat of Maharet's cunt pressing against her thigh, against her own. Maharet's hand settling tight over her mouth, when she wouldn't stop mumbling 'no'.

This time, the moment she blinked her eyes open in the hotel room, Jesse said, "Just keep going. Just do the next one. Don't wait."

Armand didn't argue with her; he didn't point out that it was a temporary solution, not giving herself even a few seconds to process it. He just did what she asked and sliced open the next seam.

A memory of a long, emotional conversation on the phone with her adoptive father, Matthew. The son of one of his coworkers had committed suicide. No warning signs, no concrete reason anyone could identify. Just—gone, forever, out of the blue. It had scared him so much; he called Jesse from his car while driving home. Couldn't even wait to get there to make sure she knew how much she was loved. How blessed he and Maria were that she'd come into their lives. How proud he was of her—her intelligence, her independence, her ambition. How much better the world was because she was in it. He just needed to make sure that she knew.

Apparently, Maharet needed to make sure she did not know.

After the fourth time Jesse insisted, "Next one," at the first instant she had control of her mouth, Armand offered:

"I'm going to assume you want me to keep going until you say stop."

Jesse knew she was incurring quite the debt against her future self; she would have to slow down and think about all of it, eventually. For now, she was ripping off

My, ah, plasticity will just be fine for another week at

"I don't require sleep as frequently as humans do. her. "Armand—" Jesse began to ask, but he anticipated here.

old banter being repeated. "I'll take the couch. Stay said, without even turning to look at him; the rhythm of

"Doesn't matter if it's just for sleeping in," Rashid cuffs, you're welcome to them."

"Mine are much nicer," Armand pointed out, "if you happen to prefer your sleeves without holes at the clothes to sleep in."

"I brought a bag. You can borrow some of my second. "Stay here," Rashid offered without hesitating for a whisper of. "I don't wanna go home."

What came out was a tiny, frightened, childish this tomorrow at 9 o'clock."

have some time alone together, finally. We can resume everything, guys. I'll head out now and let you two me. Armand makes an excellent point, thanks for

calmly, "Sorry about that, I don't know what came over Rashid could see. He would worry.

be doing it. At least, she shouldn't be doing it where still. That was cartoon crazy-person shit; she shouldn't

been rocking again, she realized, her arms wrapped crouched in front of her chair. He looked so sad. She'd eyes—when had she closed them?—and saw Rashid

Rashid's voice, very close to her. Jesse opened her "Jesse."

there nowhere Jesse could hide herself away? find Jesse? Or could she somehow track the tattoo? Was called it? An established link? Could she use that to

fuck up Jesse's mind over the phone. What had he Armand had said how powerful she was, to be able to

ways of finding her that Jesse didn't know about? looking? Could she be looking already? Did she have

to visit her and found she wasn't home, would she go really be any safer, in the end? If Maharet chose tonight

hotel—it would certainly be convenient. But would it Maybe she could get a room for the night at this

How was she supposed to ever sleep again? happened? A year ago? A month ago? Last night?

Maharet must have hidden Judith's body better than she had Neda's. Strange, that she would do a worse job the second time. Or had it been intentional? Had she wanted it found; wanted Jesse to *know*, even if she was only going to erase it right after?

"I always thought there must be something wrong with me. Something people just sensed, and that was why nobody could love me but her."

Armand and Rashid were both looking at her, but neither of them spoke. With a jerk of her head towards Rashid, she asked Armand, "You filled him in?" Hours ago, she'd given him permission to pass along whatever details he wanted.

Armand nodded, not taking his eyes off her, "I did."

She nodded back, grateful not to have to explain. She dropped her gaze to the laptop once more and clicked on the window with the plea from Judith's mother.

"I want to tell her Judith's dead, so she doesn't have to wonder anymore. I know I can't tell the whole truth, but... I want to tell her, and—and say sorry."

Rashid made a small, hurt noise. Jesse had never heard him make a noise like that.

"Jesse, it's *not* your fault—" "Isn't it?" Jesse asked. No heat in it; no emotion at all. She'd gone numb as she read the news articles. It would've been a relief, if she'd been able to feel relief. "I caused it. It happened because of me. I guess... manslaughter, not murder. Always seemed like splitting hairs to me, having two separate words for the same end result."

Rashid looked as if he wanted to argue; Armand set a hand against his arm and he subsided. Only a few hours ago she'd been jealous, looking at the two of them. So certain there had never been anyone in her life who cared for her like that.

Surprise, surprise.

"Do you think it's only romantic partners?" Jesse asked Armand. "She was... really weird, when I told her about Rashid. She said all this stuff about men having ulterior motives. Like she wanted to make sure I wouldn't trust him."

From the way the color drained from Rashid's face,

Armand knowing that washing her face would help if he sounded like her when she defended Maharet. Armand wondered how afraid Jesse would be to sleep. Armand immediately not to remember. Armand understanding immediately okay. Armand's insistence that sometimes it was better way Rashid had said Armand was only pretending to be through the things that Maharet had done to her. The small details from the last day rearranged themselves in *himself* set off a chain reaction inside Jesse. A dozen But the revelation that Armand was trying to protect Which could mean any variety of things, of course. unpleasant." of a smile made a fleeting reappearance, "—

"My own early memories are—" he hesitated, going silent for several moments until that awful corpse for Armand. ordinary person, but it was practically pacing in circles An entirely regular amount of movement, for an tucked his hair behind his ears, fidgeted with his mug. normally so still, but right now he shifted his weight, with the other signs of his intense discomfort. He was emotional state, she realized. Clear enough, combined orange that was nearly neon. It must be tied to his eyes brightened from warm tawny brown to an Jesse could see it happening in real time: the way sake. I was being a coward." "I was avoiding them, yes. But mostly for my own at. It stopped her anger dead in its tracks. He smiled—a tiny, brittle, joyless thing. Awful to look Armand lifted his head and met her gaze finally. that you might not know best." know that you won't. You're much too young to believe reconsider my advice about forgetting being a mercy. I think you're going to give up. While I wish you would because he spoke at last, "You're incorrect. I don't The gesture dislodged Armand from his reverie, drink, but the tacit rejection was clear. Armand's wrist. Armand moved away from it; he made concern stark on his face. At one point, he reached for them. For some reason Rashid was staring at Armand, A taut, awful silence stretched between the three of before we get there?"

his thumb had begun to trace along the rim of the mug, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

"All the memories we've done so far. They've all been *after 2007*."

Back and forth, back and forth went Armand's thumb. His movements were deliberately nonchalant, as he lifted his mug for a drink. Still not looking at her, or Rashid.

"Well, you're working up to that summer, right? Since it's so intertwined?" Rashid sounded puzzled. He hadn't put the pieces together yet. Armand clearly knew what she was talking about, from his too-bland expression, but then he would, wouldn't he? Since he was doing it on purpose.

Jesse sighed, exasperation breaking through her shell of numb determination. Her head really fucking hurt.

"Right at the start, you said the edits were spread out across my whole life. And it's not like you're going in any kind of order. So how come you haven't done any from when I was a kid?"

Armand's throat bobbed. Rashid went very, very still beside him. The tension in the room had become palpable.

"You're avoiding the early stuff, right? Cause you think it's gonna be bad?"

Armand didn't try to deny it at least. Jesse knew it was unfair to be angry with him. Beyond unfair, really; he didn't have to be doing any of this. He was, there was no point in denying it, functionally torturing himself on her behalf. Even the thin justification of his own curiosity didn't apply any longer. She should be thanking him until she had no breath left in her lungs, not criticizing.

It was just that he hadn't *asked* if he should avoid the earlier memories. He had just made the choice for her, decided without consultation what was good for her, and gone ahead and done it and hoped she wouldn't notice—

(She knew that it wasn't really Armand she was feeling angry at. But knowing didn't make it any easier to stop.)

"Do you think you're sparing me for the time being, or are you betting that I'm going to give up

the curve of her nose, the shape of her eyebrows, the gold-brown of her irises—one of them had three tiny freckles in a lopsided triangle that Jesse adored. They'd set up all the candles near the bed and stayed in it, back on. Sometimes in that hazy, delicious blur, Neda had said: "I want to do this with you every day..." In the next memory, Jesse was alone. Her phone propped between her shoulder and her ear as she cooked. She was talking fast. Loud, chatty, boisterous: telling Maharet all about how in love with Neda she was. How happy she felt, how seen, how *safe* with her! They might move in together! Nothing planned yet. Didn't want to jinx it. But Jesse thought that maybe this time it might happen. This time someone might finally, really, *actually* want her.

A quick lurch into another memory. Four days later, sitting frozen on her couch, watching the news report. Body of missing woman located in SoHo dumpster; Neda's med school graduation picture on the screen. She hated that picture, hated the way she'd done her hair that morning and the shade of lipstick she'd chosen. Jesse always thought she looked cute in it. Body exsanguinated. No leads at present. If you have any information... Neda, dead. Neda, dead, when a week ago she'd been in Jesse's bed talking about robot vacuums and shoe racks.

A knock at the door. Jesse's stomach turned. Yes, it would only be a matter of time, wouldn't it, until someone showed up to talk to her. The cops or reporters or Neda's big brother. She should call him, he must be coming undone, he'd practically raised her... Strangling dread, as she went to answer the knock; relief like a tsunami, the second she recognized Maharet on her doorstep. Her aunt Maharet, in the flesh for the first time since she left Sonoma, here just when Jesse needed her most. She would know what to do. She would make it all better.

Jesse did not hug her so much as collapse into her arms, crying like a child before Maharet had even gotten the door closed. Maharet steered them both to the couch and sat, guiding Jesse into her lap. Jesse curled against her, sobbing as Maharet patted her hair.

"I know, I know, my darling—" she murmured.

"H-how are you here? How d-d-did you know to come?"

"I always know when you need me."

Maharet reached for the abandoned remote control on the cushion beside her, shutting the TV off mid-report. Jesse felt a wave of anxiety, wondering if she should be doing something. What did people do, when their girlfriends got murdered? Should she get a lawyer? Would that look bad?

"Shhh, shhh, don't fret. You don't need to do anything at all. I took care of it. No one else is going to knock."

Jesse shuddered with relief, buried her tear-streaked face into the curve of Maharet's neck. Relief, followed a second later by confusion. How could Maharet have simply 'taken care' of it? It was too good to be true. A murder had been committed, and Jesse had been dating the victim for almost a year now. Someone would have to at least rule her out, wouldn't they?

The confusion took root; it spread. How had Maharet known just what Jesse was thinking, when she heard that knock? But it was hard to focus, with those cool fingers combing through her hair in long hypnotic strokes. Hard to think through the mire of grief, realizations battering her brain one after another. *Neda is dead. Somewhere, in a drawer, her body is cold. We will never buy a new washing machine together. We will never disagree about Amy Winehouse again. We will never—*

"God, oh God, she's really *gone*."

Jesse pulled away from Maharet, groping for the box of tissues on the coffee table. She tried to clean herself up a little, the mess of tears and snot and spit that she'd become in her grief. She got up to dispose of the trash, and as she was walking back, she got a proper look at Maharet for the first time.

She looked exactly the same as she had in Sonoma, even though that was over a decade ago. How had she not aged a single day in all those years? Even her hair was the exact same: same length, same style. Everything the exact same...

No, not everything. Her eyes were different. Jesse drew closer; why was it so hard to make her feet move?

as much of the band-aid as she could, as fast as she could.

It was Rashid, in the end, who insisted shortly before noon that they pause. Jesse opened her mouth to argue, but before she could, he pointed out that it was almost time for Armand to pray again. Rashid was definitely using that fact as a tactic to force Jesse to take a break, but that didn't change that it was true. She agreed sullenly and offered to go grab something for lunch.

The walk was nice; it gave her a little privacy to take some painkillers for her excruciating headache without Rashid fretting over it. She returned fifteen minutes later with sandwiches, to find Rashid preparing refreshments for everyone in the suite's small kitchen area: for himself—a mug of tea the way he took it (no milk, so much sugar Jesse always pretend to gag as he stirred it all in); for Jesse—a mug of tea the way she took it (a little milk, a little sugar); for Armand—a mug of blood fresh from his wrists.

Jesse arrived just in time to see Armand use his sharp nail to flick a cut into the pad of his thumb and smooth that blood over the small wound. The skin knitted itself back together right in front of her eyes. Once the healing was complete, Armand lifted Rashid's hand and kissed the center of his palm in gratitude. Rashid, already so close, cupped Armand's cheek. Armand closed his eyes and leaned hard into the touch, at which point Jesse looked away.

(Such small, chaste gestures. So breath-taking, the silent intimacy of it.)

They all ate and sipped together in silence for a while, which was good. Jesse's head was still pounding and she had settled into a state where all she felt was exhausted grim resolve; she was wary of disrupting that with too much conversation. If she talked about it, she would think about it, and if she thought about it... Well, she was going to continue not thinking about it for as long as she could.

Still, a question was nagging at her, and so she said, "Himm?" Rashid asked.

Armand did not say anything; Jesse had been watching him as she spoke. His gaze had dropped and

Jesse resituate herself in her body. Armand saying that was what he liked to do when he felt like that: as if feeling that exact kind of distress was not unknown to him.

Nothing definite. Nothing spoken or confirmed. But a suspicion began to form in her mind.

Armand turned and fixed an intense look on her, tilting his head to the side. "You haven't read my file," he said, slowly, as if he were only just realizing it was true. "Or you would've known not to call me Amadeo."

"No, I—how could I have? Rashid wouldn't even tell me your name."

"Himm, yes, that had slipped my mind." Armand turned his piercing gaze on Rashid, "Practicing good infosec, like a well-trained agent of the order? Or were you trying to make sure she didn't do any preliminary homework?"

Rashid's posture was immaculate, which told Jesse he was feeling defensive. The more Rashid perceived himself to be under attack, the more rigidly formal he became. Jesse wondered if it was force of habit from his years undercover, or if he'd been like that before he was sent off to Dubai. He admitted, "I didn't want to present her with the temptation."

Jesse would be annoyed by that, if she weren't completely sure it was exactly what she would have done. She might've been tempted to do it even if Rashid had asked her not to. Hard to be angry, when it was just proof that Rashid knew her so well, because he was her friend.

The sequence of the conversation had only deepened her little suspicion. If something had maybe... happened to Armand, possibly when he was a kid, there would likely be evidence of it in his Talamasca file. If the order had gone to the trouble of embedding Rashid in Armand's household for years, they clearly wanted as much information as possible on him. There was at least one painting of him in the archives; what else might there be?

"Do you... want me to read your file?" Jesse asked.

"I'm reading yours," Armand replied, "in all its gory detail. It would be understandable, if you felt... owed."

His voice went flat. Jesse wondered if Armand had

She'd been so sure that Maharet's eyes were green, just like her own. They'd been that way back in California, hadn't they? But now they were brown. A soft, lovely, familiar gold-brown. Three freckles in one, arranged in a little lopsided triangle.

Jesse froze. The fear was like nothing she could ever remember feeling before. She couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't think. All she could do was stare at the way Neda's eyes looked in Maharet's face. It was impossible. She must be going crazy.

She pulled her phone from her pocket with numb, cold fingers. Her lock screen was a selfie with Neda by a fountain, that day trip they took to Paris. Neda grinning at the camera as Jesse pressed a kiss into her cheek. Gold-brown eyes. Three freckles. Her eyes. They were her eyes. Why did Maharet have Neda's eyes?

"No," she breathed. As if by saying it, she could make it not be the truth. Change the fabric of reality, by the sheer force of her rejection. "No, no, no, no, no—Jesse didn't see Maharet move. She only felt the sudden pressure of her cold hands gripping on either side of her head, and then nothingness rushed in like the tide.

In the hotel suite, Jesse sat bolt upright. She curled forward and buried her face in her hands. She heard Rashid's voice, Armand's voice, but the sounds were meaningless. There was a ringing in her ears, loud and constant. For a little while, all she could do was shiver. She wouldn't have been able to stop if she'd tried.

When she finally felt less animal, Jesse slid from the bed and went to where she'd left her work laptop. She already knew, but she had to be sure. A quick search was all it took to confirm that Judith had not, in fact, ghosted her in April of 2012. She'd gone missing in early September of that year. Jesse found the digital remnants of the long-ago search for her: A plea from her mother on Facebook. A few news articles, for a few weeks. A website last updated in 2019 with a description of what she was last seen wearing, a message that her loved ones were still praying for her return, and a request that anyone with information contact the police.

fan blowing the hot air around unhelpfully. Such a dreadful heat wave, that August. Jesse had been the one to get to her feet and haul Judith up, drag her into the bathroom and under the cool spray of the shower. Lazy kissing had led to hungry kissing had led to Jesse's hands braced against the slick tiles, trying not to lose her balance as Judith ate her out with unhurried relish. How Jesse had gasped and trembled, saying over and over again: *I love you, I love you, don't stop, I love you*

Judith, again. Arguing in the kitchen; Jesse had made a stupid joke that she shouldn't have and now Judith was livid, accusing Jesse of not respecting her because she had dropped out of college. Jesse's stomach was sour with guilt in the memory. Judith was right, and she knew it. But she didn't just say *sorry, you're right, I'll work on it*. She was too proud to admit that some part of her was still snobby and judgmental, that she hadn't fully unlearned much of the bullshit she'd been raised to believe. So, instead of listening, she said Judith was humorless and over-sensitive. Judith stormed out the front door, and Jesse dialed Maharet's number in tears. She sobbed how she'd fucked everything up because she was an idiot, because she was selfish and stubborn, and now it could all be ruined. Did Maharet think that Judith would forgive her? She *had* to get Judith to forgive her, because she was in love—hopelessly, desperately in love—for the first time in her life. She told Maharet she'd never felt like this about anyone before. Jesse would call her; she would apologize; she would do it first thing tomorrow morning.

(In the tiny interstice between memories, Jesse thought: *oh no, it can't be, no—*)

Back to a memory of Neda, after that. Giggling, gathering candles, bumping into one another in the dark. An awful thunderstorm had knocked the power out and they were giddy as girls, striking matches and lighting three dozen or so candles. Neda had gone through a phase of writing mean witty Instagram reviews of overpriced candles while she procrastinated her undergraduate thesis; she still had so many half-burned candles. Such a chaotic medley of clashing scents. Neda was beautiful in the wavering candlelight;