

Her stomach went cold and heavy with an emotion she couldn't name. She wanted to take the necklace off. She wanted to throw up.

The feeling went away after a few minutes; it came back again when she greeted Maharet just outside the dorm. She held her arms out wide, waited for Jesse to rush into them. As soon as they were hugging, Maharet's fingers found their way to her neck. Petting over the choker and plenty of Jesse's skin, too, as she breathed, "Look at you. You were excited to see me, weren't you? I didn't even have to ask you to put it on for me."

Another memory.

Jesse had been careless. She'd snuck the necklace into her clutch and put it on after Matthew dropped her off at the prom. She had really tried to be discreet. She'd even remembered to take it off before she went for her photo, because her parents would see that she'd left the necklace on her desk. Maria had come in to wake her when she overslept, and of course she'd spotted the necklace, because Jesse had the worst luck ever. So now they were in the dining room having a Talk.

"Where did you get this?" Maria asked. Her mad-but-patient voice.

"Why's it matter?" Jesse bit back sullenly. Maria was being *ridiculous* just like always and she was so done with it.

"It matters to me. Did you shoplift it?"

"What? No! It was a gift." She hadn't really meant to say that. She had planned on giving nothing at all away, but in her righteous indignation it had just slipped out.

Maria's face changed. "Jesse, someone gave you this?"

Jesse rolled her eyes and heaved a huge, exasperated sigh. Why was she being interrogated? Why was Maria so uptight *all the time*?

"Yeah, so?"

"Who?"

"None of your business," she muttered, though there was a little squirm of guilt in her stomach as she said it. She didn't normally fight with her parents like

141

140

"Yes."
 "You want to?"
 "Yes."
 "You want to be with me?"
 "Yes."

For an instant, a piercing pain at her throat. Two sharp pinpricks, and then a flooding warmth spreading out across every inch of her skin. Something happened in her body; wave after wave of ecstasy crashed through her. Jesse cried out. Her legs shook. She thought that maybe she came, but she wasn't entirely sure. It was so hard to tell, when everything was going blurry and soft around her like a wonderful dream.

In the brief space between the memories, Jesse realized, *This was the end of that night, my third year at Columbia, when I met her in person for the first time. Please, please let that really be the first time I met her. Please let just that one thing be true...*

"I've never seen you wear that before, it's so cute," said her college roommate, Brooke.

"It's for special occasions only," Jesse explained, looking into the mirror and adjusting the cloth collar slightly. It went well with the black scoop-neck she'd put on; her cheeks pinked a little as she wondered what Maharet was going to say when she saw it.

"Looks fucking great with your tits," Brooke said. It had only taken Jesse a few days to realize that was simply how she talked: vulgar, brash. She was the kind of straight where she could speak like that about another woman's body and never consider for an instant that it might be misinterpreted. Jesse had planned on being out, at college, but she's been putting it off. She had a feeling Brooke was going to be weird about it.

"So, what's the special occasion?"

"My aunt's visiting."

Brooke's eyebrows climbed. "*That's your 'my aunt is visiting' outfit?*" She let out a *tschh* of air and looked Jesse up and down. Jesse saw herself in the mirror; she saw what Brooke must be seeing. The tight jeans, the tighter shirt, the double buns she'd twisted her hair up into, the eyeliner and pink lip gloss. "Damn, you guys must be... *close*, huh?"

She added a laugh at the end to make it clear she was joking. Jesse knew she was also not joking, a little.

their own and Jesse tumbled down, down, down into it, hauling Armand along with her.

131

137

chapter nine echoes

So different from the intimacy of letters. They had even walked through Central Park in the pitch darkness together; Maharet telling Jesse there was not the slightest reason to be afraid. And it had seemed entirely normal then, hadn't it? And so beautiful, as if they were following the paths of an enchanted forest, fearing nothing, talking in excited yet hushed voices. How divine to feel so safe!

- *Queen of the Damned*

The necklace. The necklace. So many memories wearing that necklace, all unraveling one after the other. Armand had set off an avalanche without realizing it.

The first began with an overwhelming dizziness. Jesse felt so lightheaded. The taste of wine lingered in her mouth, but it couldn't just be that. She knew what it felt like to be drunk—at this point it was being sober she was having a hard time remembering. This was more than only alcohol. She felt shivery and weak. Enervated. She barely had the strength to keep herself on her hands and knees.

The cloth of the necklace was damp with sweat, clinging to her skin. Beneath her, the chain with its little pearl at the end swayed like a pendulum. It swung and swung, its momentum renewed each time Jesse's body jolted forward from the force of a thrust. The pearl hung so low it nearly brushed against the fur of the rug. The fur felt lovely, twisted tight between her fingers as she held on. Maharet's hands were warmer than Jesse had ever felt them before, gripping her waist. Moving her. Pulling her back to meet it, every time she rolled her hips forward and filled Jesse up.

Jesse couldn't remember deciding on the dildo; most times, Maharet liked for her to pick, liked how much Jesse still flushed and stuttered when she pointed and said *this one, please*. She couldn't remember how they'd ended up on the floor of her bedroom. What had she been doing before this? What had happened, to make her so thirsty, so dizzy—

“Shh, it’s of no consequence,” Maharet hushed. Her words curled through Jesse’s mind like fog, her hand coming up to bury in Jesse’s hair, possessive and near, like it belonged there. Like everything was just where it belonged. “Just be happy, my darling.”

And Jesse was happy. Sonoma was paradise and she was so very happy.

“Please—” she gasped, “Please, do it harder, I need—”

The memory did not even finish before another overlapped it and whisked Jesse away. A different time, a different place. The warm glow of the firelight became pitch darkness. Central Park at night; no moon, no lamps anywhere nearby. The crisp chill of the spring night air and the smell of the trees, of damp soil, of Maharet’s perfume. Jesse chatted away about what classes she planned to enroll in next fall for her final year at Columbia.

They were stumbling back from a wonderful evening together. A transcendent, perfect evening. Maharet had shown up unexpectedly to her townhouse and invited her to a gallery opening. Such a sophisticated and exclusive gathering; Jesse had been the youngest person there by at least a decade. Maharet had even bought her a present—an outfit for the occasion. Probably a good thing, too; Jesse didn’t really own much nice formal wear. It was a wrap dress in a pale gold that felt like it might be real silk. It certainly felt luxurious, against her skin. The dress was modest—knee length, sleeves just down to her elbow—apart from the plunging neckline. But that was intentional, Jesse knew. It drew focus to the choke: the one Maharet had given her so many years ago. The special one.

Jesse had been able to feel people’s eyes drifting to the necklace: at the gallery, at the restaurant where they went after, on the street. Starting at its intricate embroidery, drawn tight around her neck. At the long thin gold chain running down her chest. That little pearl, sitting neatly in the dip of her cleavage.

She’d eaten so carefully, at dinner. Scared to spill a single drop on the beautiful dress. To make a fool of herself in front of Maharet, who moved so gracefully, radiated such complete ease in her own body. Jesse had

“Oh! Okay. So are you gonna stay at the house? I’m sure Mom and Dad won’t mind. We can get out the air mattress and I’ll sleep on the floor and you can have my bed, I don’t mind.”

“That’s very generous, Jesse. You’re such a sweet little thing. You’d do that, for me?”

Jesse’s face went hot with embarrassed happiness. She wasn’t sure anyone had ever called her that before. *Sweet little thing*. She probably would’ve hated it if anyone else said it. But Maharet could call her that, if she wanted to.

“Of course,” Jesse insisted, her conviction absolute. “You’re my best friend in the whole world, I’d do anything for you, aunt Maharet, you know that.”

Maharet made an odd sort of sound then—soft and high and breathy. She choked it off quickly, but it rang in Jesse’s ears. It sounded... intense. Strange.

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright? Maybe you should take a break and sit down?”

It took Maharet a little bit to answer: she was just gasping for breath now, harsh and loud through the crackly connection.

“I should. I’ll—talk to Matthew and Maria about—about perhaps coming to visit.”

Jesse didn’t like that ‘perhaps’; all other thoughts flew from her mind and she pleaded, not caring how childish and annoying she might sound.

“Pleeeaaase, please, please please aunt Maharet, please come visit, I want to meet you so much!”

Maharet laughed, breathless and low, and the memory ended.

For the space of a few breaths, Jesse was back in the hotel. She saw the light fixture, felt Armand’s forehead against hers. She understood what her younger self had not; she knew exactly what she’d been hearing on the other end of the line. Maharet had gotten that picture and called her up, touching herself as she talked to Jesse, as she imagined seeing her in that necklace, as she planned what she would do to her while she wore it...

What she would do to her...

It felt different, this time, plunging into the memories. Armand did not even have a chance to use his powers: a knot of overlapping seams tore open on

felt nervous, giggly, excited, foolish. She’d felt like she was on a first date.

And now they were winding through Central Park on their walk back home. Jesse had been frightened, when Maharet led her off the path and into an area that was heavily wooded and lightless. Jesse tried not to stumble on any roots, clinging to her aunt’s hand for dear life.

“You’re safe with me,” Maharet said. Again and again. “You’re safe with me. No reason to be afraid.”

And Jesse wasn’t afraid anymore.

Was it a compulsion? Or was she merely pliable—drunk on the glass of wine Maharet had ordered and then shipped across the table to her; drunk on the flattery of so many people looking at her like she belonged at that fancy party; drunk on Maharet’s attention, Maharet’s affection, Maharet’s presence.

Maharet didn’t fuck her, there amidst the trees. She just nudged her up against one and kissed her until her head was spinning. Kissed her and murmured into her mouth: *I love you, my Jesse, my darling, I love you*—

Jesse didn’t push her away, because she didn’t want to. She didn’t tell her to stop, because she felt it was so nice, the slow deep kissing and the total darkness and the warm buzz of the wine in her blood and feeling so safe, feeling so loved.

Was it all that strange, to love Maharet in one more way? It couldn’t be; loving Maharet was the most natural thing in the world. Love came so easy to Jesse. There was so much of it inside of her.

So few people who wanted any of it.

But Maharet did. She always had. And Maharet would never do anything wrong or hurt Jesse. She knew that with the utter conviction she reserved for things like gravity and mortality. It was a fundamental fact of reality: Maharet was good, so this must be good. The very simplest logic. Even a child could understand it.

“Darling girl. Will you come to my home, in Sonoma? Will you come and stay with me?”

Maharet’s mouth was against her neck when she asked. The drag of her lips sent shiver after shiver through Jesse.

this.

“If someone is giving my seventeen-year-old daughter expensive necklaces, it’s my business.”

Maria’s voice had gone so serious. Jesse shifted in her chair. It sounded like she was really worried that something bad was happening. She didn’t want to break her promise to aunt Maharet, but Maria was freaking out and she didn’t see any other option.

“You don’t have to make it sound gross, it’s only from aunt Maharet, okay?”

Maria made a frustrated, abortive gesture with her hand. “Well, why didn’t you just say that, Jesse?”

“I don’t know! She didn’t want me to tell you!”

Which should have ended the whole thing. But for some reason, Maria went still. She had that worried look on her face again, which was stupid. This whole thing was just a giant overreaction.

“Does she give you a lot of things she doesn’t want you to tell us about?”

Jesse folded her arms across her chest and shrugged.

Maria went to the phone on the wall and started flipping through her little address book. Looking for Maharet’s number, no doubt. Jesse’s heart began to race with fear; it had only sped up a little, during the entirety of their argument. Now she felt like it might burst out of her ribcage.

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket—normally she would never do that if Maria was in the room, but she didn’t even look up—and texted with shaking fingers.

Maria found my special necklace and I had to tell her it was from you she’s about to call you I’m really really sorry.

No response, from Maharet, but then again that made sense, because in that space of time Maria had found the right number and punched it in. Jesse watched in frozen horror. Maria looked at her, her frown deepening.

“You’re not in trouble, Jesse.”

But she was. She was in very, very bad trouble, just

that pain on the inside. Something was definitely hurt up there. What on earth had she done? Woken up with a fever, thrown off all her clothes, gone and—for some reason—put on that fancy choker her aunt had given her, and then...gotten off? It wasn't like she never did that—wake up feeling all sick down there and let her hand wander. But she'd never injured herself doing it before now.

Logically, she knew the doctors wouldn't be able to tell about it, if she didn't mention it. But what if she winced, or they asked if there was anything else she hadn't mentioned. She was only good at keeping secrets when it didn't involve directly lying.

"No," she said, "I think I just want to rest."

"Alright. But if you feel any worse, we're going, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, mom."

Another memory. This one was older, Jesse could tell, during those seconds as she slid into it. There was a smudginess around its edges. Patches missing, moments where the details became extremely minimal. A skeletal structure of a memory with occasional bursts of luridly specific sensation.

Maharet had kept her promise to visit. A treat for Jesse's upcoming fifteenth birthday, she had told Marthew and Maria. She'd gotten them a very fancy hotel room right in Manhattan and was going to take Jesse to some Broadway shows and the MoMA. Very generous of her, very kind, they both said.

Jesse didn't care all that much about doing the tourist stuff. She had the well-cultivated contempt of someone raised in New York for its various stereotypical attractions. But getting to see aunt Maharet in person? To spend all that time with her? Heaven!

She was worn out from a long day of talking and stupid carriage rides and shopping and walking, walking, all over the city. It was a relief to get back to their hotel and be able to take off her shoes. Even more so, to be able to take off the necklace. She loved it, loved how much aunt Maharet liked looking at it on her neck—all day she had been sneaking glances—but her neck itched so much from wearing it all day. She set it aside carefully in the little case Maharet had bought her for it.

time on her. Why should she—such a rich and busy and vibrant life. So very many other members of the Great Family she could be spoiling.

Jesse learned to be more careful.

Another memory. Jesse had the briefest moment of awareness in the transition and wondered when they would ever stop. Would she be trapped in this unspooling thread for minutes more, or hours? Then she was lost again.

Jesse's alarm went off at 6:00 on school days; like any other morning, she rolled over and pressed the big button on top to silence its harsh squawking. Only once it was quiet did she realize she was naked. That was weird. She didn't sleep naked—she was pretty sure that only people in books did that.

But she wasn't completely bare, though. For some reason, she was wearing her special necklace.

Jesse sat up and started unhooking the clasps, confused and uncomfortable. Her bed felt weird. All rumpled and kind of damp. Had she been sweating that much in her sleep? Her pajamas were in a heap on the floor, so maybe she'd gotten overheated and pulled them off while she was half asleep. She didn't remember doing it, but it made sense. It didn't explain the necklace, but Jesse would take half an explanation over none.

She got up and tucked the necklace away in its usual spot. Maybe she was sick. The flu came with aches, didn't it? The muscles in her thighs and butt felt oddly sore. Not just that, either. She hurt between her legs. Not like cramps—it was a different feeling. It got worse, when she moved around, so she grabbed a bathrobe, wrapped it around herself, and laid back down. As she was putting it on, she noticed the bruises. Just a few of them, no more than coin-sized, scattered around her hips and legs and the soft flesh of her inner upper arms.

When Maria arrived to check on her progress getting ready for school, she said she wasn't feeling very good. It wasn't even a lie. Maria came to the bed and laid the back of her hand against Jesse's forehead. "You don't feel hot, but you look so pale. Do you wanna go to the doctor, honey?"

Jesse shifted; as she moved, she felt a sharp stab of

Jesse wanted to thank her in kind.

She adjusted the lighting, adjusted the angle, took a couple of trial shots. The screen of the phone was tiny and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

It wasn't a big deal at all. It wasn't weird. She was only fussing because she wanted the picture to come out good. Maharet had sent her something so pretty.

And they'd giggled together on the phone at the old paintings of Minoa women with practically every part of their bodies covered apart from their breasts.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

and the picture came out okay, but not good enough.

From now, she nudged her floor lamp closer to the mirror, rearranged it to cast a more flattering light. She didn't know why she was being so vain. It was only a picture for Maharet after all. Maharet always made her feel beautifully no matter what.

Maybe it was just because she'd never taken a picture of herself without her clothes on before. A dirty picture. But it was only for Maharet, so that meant it wasn't dirty. Didn't Maharet always talk about how odd Americans were about nudity compared with the rest of the world? That in so many places it was the most natural, normal thing? Families sharing saunas, casual friends skinny dipping in the ocean, places and times where it was completely expected for women to go bare-chested. Maharet had sent her a picture book about ancient cultures when Jesse was still in middle school

“Before bed,” Maharet said, “I was thinking I’d take a bath. Wash off the city grime. Would you like to join me?”

(For a split second, the memory juddered, an unnatural vibration running through the whole scene. Like a tape that was starting to come off its reel.)

Jesse had seen how huge the bathtub was, when she’d done her once-over of the hotel room after they checked in. It was clearly meant for more than one person at once. That struck her as scandalous; she’d even joked about it. Maharet had given a rolling shrug and said that was normal for a lot of countries. Jesse had felt stupid and naïve. Almost fifteen, but she was still a dumb kid. She needed to learn to shut her big fat mouth.

“Do you want me to?” Jesse didn’t know why she felt anxious. Butterflies in her stomach. “I might splash you.”

Maharet laughed. She was already taking down her hair.

“I don’t mind a little splashing.”

This was the whole thing about growing up, Jesse knew. She couldn’t let herself be scared of stuff just because it was different or she’d never done it before. The only way to become mature was to try things even if they were scary. And when better to test that faculty in herself than here, with Maharet? It was the safest possible place she could be.

“Okay.”

(At the sound of the water turning on, it happened again. The whole room gave a shudder, going out of focus, like it would shake apart into nothing.)

Maharet was already in the tub when Jesse came to join her. She watched the whole time, as Jesse took off her clothes.

(Another little earthquake, rattling the memory apart; this time, parts of it fell away and did not come back. The color of the tiles on the floor, the warm damp humidity in the air, the faint sound of the Bollywood film the person in the neighboring room was watching. The memory halted, this time, as it happened, and Jesse had one moment of awareness in which to wonder what was going on...)

“Sit facing that way, so I can wash your hair, my

against that shirt. The colors are too close, and these phone cameras can only get so much detail. Could you show me what it looks like without it?

It took a few readings of the text for Jesse to understand what Maharet meant. At first, she thought, without the pearl? But it wasn’t detachable. Then she wondered, without the phone camera? Did Maharet want her to go and get a proper camera, sneak downstairs and borrow Matthew’s one that he used for taking pictures of bugs he’d never seen before that he came across in his walks with Maria?

Then she realized, with a little flutter low in her stomach, that Maharet meant without her shirt.

She felt embarrassed, that the first picture hadn’t been good enough, that she hadn’t put the necklace on the right way. Jesse hooked the clasp on a different link of the little chain at the back of her neck, so that the cloth was flush with her skin. Even more uncomfortable, now, though not cutting off circulation.

She took off her shirt, too.

Jesse stared at herself in the mirror, turning from side to side, trying to imagine the way it would come out when she snapped the picture. It looked even worse than with her shirt on. The pale green bralette she was wearing made her chest look flatter and more babyish. It was a size too big; Maria had insisted on buying it that way. *You don’t need a lot of support yet, anyway. Gives you some room to grow into it.* The humiliation of that. Buy the garment now and wait for her stupid body to catch up.

Embarrassed and miserable, Jesse yanked the bralette off and looked in the mirror once again. The necklace did look a little better, now that her chest was bare. The dangling pearl nestled neatly between her breasts—each one still only a comfortable little handful—like it belonged right there. Maharet had been right: the gold of the chain looked good against her bare skin, thin as a thread, going up up up, past her clavicles, to the cloth collar wrapped snug around her pale throat. It looked exotic and grown-up and sexy. *She* looked exotic and grown-up and sexy.

143

941

All that week, Maharet did not speak to her. Did not pick up the phone when Jesse called, did not respond to her texts. It was a punishment; Jesse knew that. If she couldn’t be good, Maharet would not waste

I won’t, I promise. I’m sorry.

Don’t let it happen again.

Maharet responded a few seconds later:

I’m sorry.

Five minutes later, another desperate:

Are you mad?

A minute later:

I’m sorry.

When Maharet didn’t text back, Jesse added another:

I know, I’m really really sorry. I won’t do it again.

You need to learn to be more careful with your things, Jesse.

Jesse’s phone chimed. A reply from Maharet.

back at Jesse as she went.

And with that, Maria hung up the phone and simply walked out of the room. Not a word or a glance

Sure, I understand.”

time, though she couldn’t make out her words, “Uh huh.

that Maharet was speaking from the other end of the

“Uh huh,” Maria said. Jesse could very faintly hear

It was kind of scary.

over her. Jesse had never seen her look like that before.

I was—” and she stopped. A glazed, vacant look came

mouth, got through the words “Hi, Maharet! It’s Maria.

The call must have connected. Maria opened her

not from Maria.

“Just—climbing some stairs. You caught me halfway up a tower.”

You sound kind of weird.”

pause, and then Jesse added, “Are you feeling okay?”

all day together. Do you have plane tickets yet?” A

it’s after that I won’t need to go to school, we can spend

day! When? Summer vacation starts in two weeks so if

“Of course! If you came to visit I’d wear it every

seeing Maharet.

Jesse would have said yes to anything, if it meant

about it like it was an actual possibility.

back in the U.S.—never before now had she talked

hope, either. No ‘somebody’ or ‘maybe’ or ‘when I’m

scolded her for asking, but she never gave Jesse any

begged to finally meet Maharet? Her aunt never

Jesse’s heart leapt. How many times had she

for me, if I visit?”

so hard. Maybe she’d been running? “Will you wear it

“If I visit,” Maharet interrupted. She was breathing

take it off for P.E., and someone might steal it—”

and I don’t wanna get in trouble. And I would have to

at school. I’m pretty sure it’s against the dress code,

“I—I don’t know if we’re allowed to wear chokers

and that was good.

didn’t even say hello first. But she didn’t sound angry,

“Will you wear it for me?” Maharet asked. She

hadn’t made her cry. That would be the worst thing.

fast, too staccato. Was she crying? Jesse hoped she

clearly, but her breathing sounded odd to Jesse. Too

without very good coverage. It was hard to hear her

when Maharet called from somewhere in the world

The connection was bad, the way it sometimes got

messed up, why was she such an idiot?

accepted the call. She’d messed up, she knew she’d

Heart pounding with fear, she hit the button to

so badly that she nearly dropped it.

The phone began to ring in her hand, startling Jesse

thinking—

She shouldn’t have taken off her bra, what was she

her past message? She ought to be allowed to do that.

begin panicking. Why wasn’t there a button to delete

for Maharet’s reply. It took around 10 seconds for her to

Jesse stared at the text exchange, waiting anxiously

She hit the button to send the photo.

134

131

terrified whimpers. Muffled, like he had a hand over his mouth to try to keep them quiet.

Understanding came in pieces. She tucked the rest of it away into a compartment in her mind marked 'deal with this later' and focused on that final memory. The birthday trip, the shared bath. She hadn't been able to understand while she was pinned between dual memories, but she could see now that some of it had not been from her own mind.

It didn't take a genius to figure out where it must have come from.

She'd only seen a few fragments. Nothing compared to what he'd witnessed of her own life over the last day. But they'd told plenty, hadn't they? Those few details.

How small he had been. How little his hands were, next to those other ones.

How thin he had been. Not the kind of thin that could be explained by body type or youth or metabolism. Starvation thin.

How bruised he had been. Marks all over his body, some newer, some older.

How scared he had been. She'd felt it, the same way he felt everything from her own memories. All that frantic dread.

How confused he had been. Not recognizing the words being spoken to him. Not responding to the name the man had used for him.

Rashid seemed to be cycling through different languages, now. Seeing if any might get through. Jesse recognized French, Italian, but there were others too. She realized in retrospect that the man in the bath had probably been speaking Italian. But the sounds had meant nothing to Armand, at the time he'd heard them, so they were recorded as only frightening gibberish.

Rashid was repeating the same phrase in each language: "You're safe. It's Rashid. I'm here, and you're Armand now, and you're safe. Can you understand me?"

That calm, steady voice of his. The exact opposite of how Armand sounded at present. Hard to tell it was even him: the sounds were so breathy and high. Like a child was making them. Jesse didn't want another person on the planet to come within ten feet of her.

149

didn't know how to ask her to stop without making her upset.

"And then you came along. I didn't notice it until you were six or so. I can't remember earlier than that myself, so I don't know what Mekare looked like as a baby. But once I saw that picture Matthew sent of your first day of kindergarten, I knew. You were my twin, my sister, brought back to me in a new form."

As she said it, so quick Jesse almost thought she imagined it, Maharet cupped her breast. Put her hand over it, gave a little squeeze. Then it had moved away, before Jesse could even react.

(Those unfamiliar hands, pinching at tiny, dark nipples. Smaller hands, trying to push them away. A wordless whimper of fear and confusion. A rumbling soft man's laugh. More words he didn't understand. Something hard, poking against the back of his leg. He tried to move away from it. The hands pulled him back.)

"Your hair, your hair, ah, your beautiful hair..." Maharet gathered it up and lifted it to kiss it, dark and heavy with water in her hands.

(The overlapping memories were corroding one another. More and more pieces began to fall away—faster and faster, from the scene with Maharet, until only her voice was left, echoing over the other one, the bath with the boy in it, who was crying so quietly it was hard to even hear it.)

"Jesse," Maharet's voice, velvet and warm, "When I'm done washing your hair, will you let me show you something nice?"

(*Amadeo, Amadeo*—)

The memories broke apart.

Jesse was jolted violently back into her body. It took a while to remember where she was and what was happening. Once she did, she realized something had gone very, very wrong with that last memory.

"Armand?" Rashid said, and Jesse realized she'd heard him say it a few times before already. So it must be Armand who was making those little noises. Rashid was still holding onto her hand, but he had moved off the bed. He was kneeling on the floor beside it, bending low to look underneath. That was where the sounds were coming from, Jesse realized. All those shivery,

148

backpack. It was nice to be able to call Maharet if she ran into a ghost that scared her, or if she was so excited about a movie they watched at school that she wanted to talk about it right away, before she even finished her walk home. Jesse adapted to the new technology quickly, and it delighted her, teaching Maharet about all the things this phone could do—Maharet had gotten herself a matching one, she'd said. Exactly the same kind. Jesse explained to her how to play games, how to download a custom ringtone.

Maharet was particularly delighted by the little camera inside the phone that could take and send pictures directly.

On days when Jesse would text Maharet feeling awful because the other girls at school were prettier, and thinner, and they knew how to do their makeup like movie stars, Maharet would say: *Take a picture, send it to me, and I'll tell you what I see.*

Jesse would do it, of course, and the torrent of praise that followed never failed to cheer her up. There seemed to be a thousand different words for beautiful, and her aunt knew them all. They weren't empty, formulaic compliments, either. Not like the kind Marta gave, when they went shopping for clothes or she caught Jesse scrutinizing herself in the mirror. Maharet was so descriptive and so specific about all the parts of Jesse that she liked. For a little while, Jesse could tune out the background noise telling her to despise her body, and she could like all her parts, too.

On occasion, Maharet wouldn't just tell her how beautiful she was. She would get very serious and say how much Jesse looked like her sister. It was such a tragedy; Maharet had had a twin, Mekare, who went missing a long, long time ago when they were both young. Jesse had never had any siblings, but she imagined it hurt Maharet to think about Mekare the same way it always hurt Jesse when she thought about Miriam and never getting to know her.

One day, laying on her bed and chatting on the phone, Jesse worked up the courage to ask: "Does it ever make you sad, when I send you pictures and stuff? Because I look like her?"

"No, my darling. It makes me happy. You're like a gift. Like the universe has sent a little part of her back

128

to me, through you."

Jesse couldn't stop smiling after their call was over, thinking about that. She liked the idea of being a gift from the universe. It made her feel important. Like she'd been specially molded, just to be loved by Maharet. Like she had a place, a purpose, a guarantee of what she was for in the grand scheme of things.

It all made sense. She was a gift to Maharet, and she loved Maharet, and Maharet loved her, and that was why Maharet gave her so many gifts back.

Once more, Jesse felt it, when Armand finally got a grip on the place where her recollections were stitched together over something. He tore through, and she lost all sense of herself in the memory.

Maharet had told her last night on the phone that there was a present waiting for her in their box. She wouldn't say what it was. Jesse was too eager to know; she skipped her after-school music lesson and went right away to pick it up. It'd be trouble, if her instructor called Matthew and Maria, but he'd never rattled her out to them before, the few times she hadn't shown up. This would give her a whole hour home alone, before her parents returned from work, to enjoy whatever it was.

In her bedroom, she unfolded the crisp tissue paper she'd found inside the padded envelope. Once it was unwrapped, though, Jesse wasn't entirely sure what it was. There was a band of soft golden cloth, embroidered with intricate floral patterns in rich greens and reds. Gold chains, as fine and delicate as threads, dangled from the cloth—two in symmetrical loops, and a longer one between them, ending in a single suspended pearl.

It must be some kind of jewelry, based on the clasp, but Jesse wasn't sure exactly how to wear it.

She texted Maharet, whose response came right away.

It's a necklace. A choker, I think they call it nowadays. I've not seen one in this precise style for a long time. It reminds me of the ones we used to wear, when we were your age.

129

Jesse could remember when Maria used to do that when she was very small. How nice it had felt. How careful she always was never to get the soap in Jesse's eyes. (This time, not an earthquake but an overlay. Jesse, nearly climbing into the bathtub facing away from her aunt; at the same time, superimposed, a different bath. Water pouring into a huge basin from something carved to look like a shell. It was beautiful, the workmanship of it all. The image was drenched in wordless overwhelming terror.) The water was deliciously hot; it made Jesse's skin flush a deep pink everywhere it touched. So annoying, to be so pale. And now Maharet could see all the parts of her that were even paler than the rest. Maharet's hands on her shoulders were firm, coaxing her to scoot forward and then lay back, wetting her hair up to the scalp. "I love your hair," Maharet said as she started to work in the shampoo. Jesse relaxed and got used to it after a few minutes. "Ever since you were a baby. I always told Maria, don't you dare let her cut it. It would be a crime to trim more than a single inch, just to keep it healthy." (Another voice. Jesse didn't know that voice. How could a voice she didn't know be floating over her own memory? Words she couldn't understand, did not recognize, apart from a name—Amadeo. Big white hands rubbing lather over a chest. Not Jesse's chest; brown-skinned and narrow and flat, so skinny she could count every rib. So many bruises it took her a second to even recognize that was what they were.) "I used to dream about her hair every night," Maharet murmured, half to Jesse half to herself. "How the first thing I would do once I found her was braid it, just like I always used to when we were young. I thought if I ever got her back, I would braid our hair together, so tight no one could ever undo the knot, and we would never be parted again. My other half, back to stay." She wasn't just washing Jesse's hair. Her hands kept straying. Running along her shoulders, her throat, to. She probably didn't even notice it happening. Jesse

147

150

right now, but she wanted to hug him tight.

There must be some way she could help. She let go of Rashid's hand and slid her legs to the edge of the bed, about to join him on the floor. But Rashid signaled for her to stop. He didn't take his eyes away from under the bed as he said, his voice very calm, but very firm.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to insist that you stay where you are for right now, Jesse. Armand is very, very afraid at the moment and he doesn't understand where he is or if he's in danger. If you startle him, he might panic and hurt you, and I would very much like that not to happen. So if you could just stay on the bed and stay quiet, I'm going to calm him down, and I'll let you know when it's safe to talk and move. Okay?"

He glanced up just long enough to catch her nod, and then looked underneath the bed again. It was such a narrow space. Jesse was surprised Armand had been able to fit. Then again, perhaps that had been the appeal. A wounded animal, wedging itself into a crevice too narrow for a predator to reach in and grab it.

Rashid went back to his message, cycling through languages. Repeating it again and again, until eventually, his voice thick with tears, Armand replied, "Maître?"

Rashid's French was flawless as he answered back, saying that no, his Maître wasn't here, but Rashid was, didn't he remember Rashid? And it was 2022, and Armand was in London, with their friend Jesse, and they were in that hotel he liked so much, and nothing bad was happening, and it was safe for him to come out as soon as he decided he wanted to. Gradually, the panicky breathing slowed down, the small whimpers subsiding into silence. It felt like it took a long time, but Jesse didn't move or make a sound, like Rashid had asked.

There was a soft scraping sound as Armand slid himself out from underneath the bed. Expensive as this hotel was, it was clear that housekeeping was not all *that* thorough, when it came to sweeping under the beds. There were a considerable number of cobwebs clinging to Armand when he emerged. He sat up, hitched a shivery post-sobbing-fit breath, and began to pluck them off.

Rashid didn't reach for him or ask him any

A pause, and then another text.

Almost perfect! The cloth part is supposed to fit tighter around your neck. That's why it's a 'choker!' You don't actually want to choke, but it should be right up against your throat, not loose. The colors really suit you. They look so good with your skin tone, I knew they would.

text came through.

After an agonizing handful of minutes, Maharet's praise? Now she was trying to find her way to some polite Jesse? Had she been expecting it would look better, and do it? Or was she disappointed at how it looked on frustrated her aunt, after those clear instructions how to Had she done something wrong? Put it on wrong and Maharet. Worry burrowed its way into Jesse's chest. For a few moments, there was no reply from the other girls at school—and sent it along. Getting good at this, taking pictures of herself, just like Jesse obliged. She took the picture—she was

You should send me a picture, so I can check if you put it on right, and see how pretty it looks on you.

Jesse knew that 'we' meant Maharet and Mekaré. She felt the usual warm rush, the tingling exhilaration at being included, invited in to be part of this very essential, tragic, beautiful facet of who her aunt was. Maharet walked her through putting the necklace on. Maria didn't believe in children wearing jewelry, so Jesse wasn't used to the feeling of something on her neck. The cloth was a bit tch against her skin. She arranged it so that the loops of gold chain dipped down to just above her clavicles and the long, pendant chain traveled down atop her breasts, the pearl perched halfway down her shirt.

130

127

letter. This was always how they did it—after Jesse finished a book Maharet sent, she'd write with her opinions. This time, Jesse didn't know what to say. She felt awkward and shy and wished she'd liked the book more. She wished, a little bit, that Maharet had sent her something else. But she didn't say that. She just wrote that she wasn't sure short stories were her favorite.

Jesse felt Armand in her mind, nudging her along as the memory ended. Looking through what else she remembered of her gifts from Maharet—the public and the private ones. When they came along, what they meant to Jesse, how they changed her relationship with her aunt.

When she was fourteen, her parents moved to a different neighborhood in New York, and Maharet bought her her very first cell phone. *So you can keep up with all the friends you're going to make at your new school, and call your parents if you ever need to.*

Jesse had been thrilled. She never made the friends, of course, but it was nice to have the phone just in case she ever did. It was sleek and small and pink; Jesse decorated it with a beaded tassel and some cute stickers that she had been saving.

A few weeks later, Maharet sent a second phone to their box.

This one's just for the two of us. Your parents insisted on paying for the plan for the other one, but texts and calls are so expensive! I don't want to get you in trouble just for talking to me. That's why I got you this one, too. So we can just chat whenever we want and you don't have to worry. I don't want Matthew and Maria to feel bad about the money, though, so we should probably keep it a secret.

It was an old comfortable routine by then, their shared secrets. It made Jesse so proud that aunt Maharet trusted her so very much. They joked about it a lot. Maharet always said what a good spy she would make—secrets went in and never came out. The governments of the world weren't going to be ready for her.

Jesse liked having the second phone. She carried it with her everywhere, tucked at the bottom of her

realized. Something she wouldn't even have to leave the hotel suite for. She got up from the table and started opening all the drawers in the little kitchen. It had come stocked with some basics—the mugs they were drinking from, for instance. Jesse thought there were probably some utensils, as well.

“What are you looking for?” Rashid asked, tentatively. Probably because she'd taken out a steak knife and was squinting at it, turning it over in her hand.

“Scissors,” Jesse said, “but it doesn't look like they've got any, so I guess this'll have to do.”

“I have a pair of scissors in my bag,” Armand announced. And then, without missing a beat, “Would you like to do it yourself, or might I assist you?”

Of course, he knew why she wanted them. What a relief not to have to explain.

“Sure. That'd be cool, thanks.”

Rashid glanced between them, confused. He would get it soon enough. Jesse started unraveling her braid as she headed for the suite's bathroom, confident that Armand and Rashid would follow after her. She settled herself on the edge of the tub, her back to the rest of the small room. She closed her eyes, but she could hear the zip of Armand's bag, the little inhale of understanding from Rashid.

“How short?” Armand asked.

“Very.”

“Like this?”

A gentle nudge against her thoughts: an image of her with a chin-length bob. It looked cute. She would've looked cute, if she'd done her hair like that in college. Or when she was on dig sites—how much easier it would have been to look after! But she never had. Never in her life.

“No, not like that, shorter. I want—” she broke off, rubbing her hands along the tops of her thighs. A steady sigh, and then she made herself say it, “Too short to get a grip on.”

Armand made a wordless noise of understanding. He began gathering her hair together—simple, necessarily, entirely expected action. Jesse shuddered hard, her whole body going tense as she fought not to pull away. She gripped the edge of the bathtub, her knuckles white with the force of it. Armand paused, his

solely on her own aims. Why on Earth had it felt so critical to her? This goal of undoing every single alteration, no matter how small, no matter how traumatic the process. What lay behind that sick completionism?

Was it just the old curiosity? The archaeologist in her, the agent of the Talamasca in her? Was she being a thorough researcher? Or had some part of her been desperately groping for a nebulous idea of purity? Had she been secretly hoping that if it was all undone, every single stitch in her mind, she could pretend the mutilation had never occurred in the first place?

“No more early stuff,” she declared, the words muffled from the way her cheek was mashed against Armand's shoulder. “Not if we can avoid it. Okay?”

“Okay,” Armand echoed. He didn't say thank you, but he did squeeze her a bit tighter.

“It's in a box, in a drawer in my room at the Motherhouse,” Jesse said. They were at the table again. More tea for Jesse and Rashid. No blood for Armand, although Rashid had offered. He had, however, changed into clothes with a little less dust on them. “I don't have a whole lot from back home. Moving internationally, you know? You can't bring too much. But I had room for that.”

A pause, and then she added, “I wonder if she still puts it on me.”

She shouldn't have said that out loud; Rashid flinched like he'd been hit. This had to be so hard for him. Being on the outside, concerned about them both, unable to help apart from making tea. The tea helped a lot, but he probably wouldn't believe that, no matter what she said.

They were supposed to be off in Barton-upon-Whatever, or else Jesse would've proposed a little detour to the Motherhouse to destroy that necklace. She still planned to do it once all this was over. She hadn't settled on a method yet. How hot did a fire need to get, to melt gold chains? She was going to need to do a little research. It would be worth it. How good it was going to feel, destroying something Maharet had found beautiful. Taking it away from her.

But there was something else Jesse could do, she

The secrecy was a part of the fun, anyway: taking a detour on the walk home from school to get the packages from the P.O. Box that aunt Maharet had opened in her name. Hiding them in her backpack, behind her chemistry textbook or under her copy of *Jane Eyre*. Waiting to open them until the house was empty, or after Matthew and Maria had gone to sleep. Finding hidden places in her room to stash her presents. Sometimes, she didn't even need to hide them. A lot of the private gifts she received were books, and her parents never seemed to notice a new book on the shelf. Maharet liked sending Jesse things she wanted her to read and then hearing her thoughts in her next letter.

Just because. Gifts just for Jesse, since she was (don't tell anyone!) Maharet's favorite. Gifts to be kept between the two of them, because it would only make her cousins envious if they found out, and Maharet knew what a hard time she had trying to fit in. Even her parents, well... Matthew and Maria weren't always very good about private information, were they? If they knew, it would spread to everyone in the entire family soon enough.

Aunt Maharet liked to send gifts. She sent gifts to all the members of the Great Family who were still growing up. Bicycles and kayaks for Christmas, violins and sable fur parkas for birthdays. Quality things, thoughtful things, objects fit for showing parents, and boasting to school friends, and writing effusive ‘thank you’ emails.

Jesse received these gifts like all the others. But for her, they were not the only ones. There were other presents, sent in between the holidays and life events and expected occasions. Gifts just because. Gifts just for Jesse, since she was (don't tell anyone!) Maharet's favorite. Gifts to be kept between the two of them, because it would only make her cousins envious if they found out, and Maharet knew what a hard time she had trying to fit in. Even her parents, well... Matthew and Maria weren't always very good about private information, were they? If they knew, it would spread to everyone in the entire family soon enough.

would've assumed you were snooping extra just for fun.”

Armand exhaled and nodded; he seemed to finally believe her, because he bent forward and rested his forehead against hers. Rashid's warm hand slid into hers.

“Think about Maharet,” Armand instructed, his voice soft. “When you were a child. What did you think of her? What was she like?”

Jesse closed her eyes and cast her mind back. Aunt Maharet liked to send gifts. She sent gifts to all the members of the Great Family who were still growing up. Bicycles and kayaks for Christmas, violins and sable fur parkas for birthdays. Quality things, thoughtful things, objects fit for showing parents, and boasting to school friends, and writing effusive ‘thank you’ emails.

Not all that different from a book report, except that the books Maharet sent were always interesting, and she could be totally honest about her opinions. Now and then, Maharet would argue back gently. Ask her to reconsider from a different angle, or re-read a certain passage. It all made Jesse feel very adult, and very respected, and very important.

So many years later, Maharet still liked sending Jesse gifts. They had simply stopped being secrets once she moved out of her parents' house. But it had been harmless, their little clandestine game of favoritism. It had been completely innocent.

Except...
Except.

Jesse *felt* it in her mind when Armand found the hidden memory. Felt him dig his fingers in and pry it open.

When Jesse was twelve, Maharet sent a book to their box; Jesse found a little note in the packaging saying maybe it shouldn't go on the shelf with all the others.

This one is a little advanced compared to what they have you reading in school, but I know how much precocious minds need to be challenged! I think you're smart enough to read anything you want at this age, but I'm not sure Matthew and Maria know that yet. I know how frustrating it is, but try to remember that they still see you as the little baby you were when I first brought you to them. They'd tried to have one of their own for so many years! It's hard for them to adjust to the fact that you're a young woman now. I do hope you like the book. If anything in it is confusing or you need help to understand, there's no need to be embarrassed - you can just ask me. You know you can always ask me anything.

Jesse glowed with pride reading the note. Just earlier that week she had burst into tears when Matthew refused to let her go see an R-rated film that all the older kids at her school kept talking about. But aunt Maharet talked to her like an adult. She knew Jesse wasn't a naïve little kid anymore.

convenient for her to believe it. She'd been focused

Of course she'd believed it. It had been more at the beginning, that it wasn't true. Even though Rashid had *told* her, right things he was living through in her memories as he himself believe Armand really was as unaffected by the into a reluctant 'yes' didn't make it right. She had let experiences. Just because she'd been able to talk him confronted, angrily) that it was because of his own doing. After he'd had the courage to tell her (when and been too ashamed to admit that was what he was After he had specifically avoided her early memories. It had been a mistake to push him, she realized.

It as she held him close. He was trembling, still. She could feel back of her shirt. He was clinging to fistfuls of the

After a moment, he hugged her back. His arms been a small, hurt boy in a bathtub.

Even though, a very long time ago, he had repayment. Through this ordeal without complaint or expectation of

He was also just a man, who had been helping her a powerful immortal vampire half a millennium old.

She wouldn't hurt him, after all; he was she could give. She wouldn't hurt him, after all; he was head once. Jesse slid from the bed and knelt, warping

right away. But, after a few moments, he nodded his She thought he might say no. He didn't say yes

give you a hug, please?" in his. She didn't know how he could bear it. "Can I

always live in her mind, the way hers was going to live been Armand, and now a piece of his horror would

heard it, and *felt* it. Armand had been her and she had able to fill in the rest, which remained unspoken: and

"I saw it," Jesse confirmed. She knew he would be perhaps, it was only me."

"Ah," he said, "You did see. I had thought, up, understanding dawning in his face.

At the sound of her voice, he looked floor, covered in dust with thick streaks of red down

couldn't help it. He looked so small, sitting there on it. She *"Armand,"* Jesse said, her voice cracking on it. She

happen again." in English, "Pardon me for the disruption. It will not

questions. Eventually, his throat bobbing, Armand said

hesitation a wordless question.

"Keep going," Jesse said.

He pulled her hair into a ponytail and then re-braided it, quick and efficient. Less mess that way, probably. Jesse stayed still while he did it, and soon enough she heard the rasp of the scissors as he began to cut. Her head was a froth of overlapping memories—some freshly unburied, others now unrecognizable in the new light of her knowledge. Maharet brushing her hair, braiding it, washing it, stroking it, kissing it, pulling it as she—

"I used to do this for the other boys at the palazzo," Armand said, very quietly. Jesse seized onto the words like a lifeline, trying to distract herself from the chaotic churn of remembered touches.

"The palazzo?" she asked.

"In Venice, where I grew up. I liked finding little ways to make myself useful. The other boys all assisted my master with his painting, but I—"

A pause, as Armand searched for the right words. In a way, his words were like the fragments of his memories had been. Sparse, but laden with so many implications. It wasn't hard to begin to construct a story around them. He had not understood Italian in the memory, so—not a native to that country. He had said his 'master'. It could mean a variety of things, but something in his tone...and Jesse knew how common slavery had been in Venice in the Renaissance. Occam's razor suggested that Armand's master who painted was probably the same person that did the one in the Talamasca's vault. 'The Temptation of Amadeo'. That name landed differently, now.

She wasn't going to ask him about it. She was just going to listen.

"I couldn't bear to. So I kept everyone's hair neat. And I learned how to shave, and I did that for the older boys, too. We—looked after each other."

Had all of the boys been slaves, Jesse wondered. Had that man abused all of them, or only Armand? Had he believed he had a right to do it, since Armand was his property? Did Maharet think of Jesse as her property? Not legally, anymore, but Armand had said Maharet must be even older than him. She had come from a time of slavery. Of families owning their

The next morning, she went to write Maharet a

and gossiped out? Or should she want that already—was there something wrong with her for feeling mostly confused

little older? Would she want to do these things once she got a of things inside their bodies? Did it really feel that

mouths in those places? Letting people stick all kinds Her stomach felt funny the more she read. Did

people actually like all these things? Putting their get it. Her stomach felt funny the more she read. Did

stories excited about getting it on their face? She didn't sperm to an egg. So why were so many people in the

until that point, it had the sole purpose of carrying too: sweat, spit, semen. Jesse knew about the last of

gasping. There was a lot of attention on bodily fluids, laughed and kissed and gasped. There was a lot of

where no one was getting hurt. The ones where people Other stories she didn't mind so much; the ones

she probably wouldn't care. wanted to be precocious. If she were more precocious,

discomfort. She wanted Maharet's note to be true. She women's bodies. She felt mad at herself for her

had sexual fantasies of sticking knives inside of new student and 'using' him; the one about a man who

boarding school taking turns holding down the pretty daughters to have sex with him; the one about boys at a

upset her: the one about a man forcing his teenage Jesse didn't know how to feel. Some of the stories

and how good it made them feel. people did with each other: how badly they wanted it

about sex as it happened, in vivid detail. The things her earlier that year, to explain about puberty and

and patronizing educational guides Maria had bought existed that talked about sex this way. Not like the dry

Maharet's note. But Jesse hadn't realized that books much gossiped that sex would come up in them, from

They weren't at all what she expected. She'd pretty Jesse alone sounded very sophisticated and grown-up to

flashlight. It was a collection of short stories—that her backpack and button under the covers with it and a

She waited until nighttime to pull the book from

experienced that a lot: people asserting that he *owed* them information about his past.

"I think," she said, "you don't owe me shit, and I'd much rather get to know you the normal way."

That earned her a smile—something warm and a little shy—before Armand lifted his mug and drank the last of the blood.

"You don't owe me anything. I meant that. But...if you're *willing* to do the earlier memories, I think we should. If I'm going to get the complete picture, I need to know how it started."

I need to know how much it's my fault.

Armand started and Jesse realized he must have overheard her stray thought. He did not comment on it. He delivered no lectures about victimhood and blame, the way she thought Rashid might have if she'd said it aloud.

He merely said, "I will try."

"This is going to be considerably more challenging than it was with the memories you made as an adult—"

"I know," Jesse cut him off, "I'm ready. As ready as I can be."

"I was not referring to emotional difficulty. I am trying to explain the...technical challenges, for want of a better word. The further back I go, the murkier your memories will be. That is entirely to be expected. It would be the same in Rashid or any other human. We won't be able to simply dive in, as we have up 'til now. I will need to search in order to find the edits. Sift through your intact memories and thoughts on your childhood until I come across them. Only then I can undo what has been done."

Armand was...nervous. Anxious, as if asking her permission.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever you need to do."

He fidgeted. Even with that clear go-ahead, he kept hesitating, "I wanted you to know that this is not mere voyeurism. I am not prying for the sake of it, out of prurience—"

"Armand," she cut him off, "In the nicest way possible, duh. I know you've already gotten way more of the immersive Jesse Reeves experience than you ever could've wanted. I never in a million years