

Chapter One

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Wildflower

Blythe slouches low in the shadowed interior of her car, nestled in a dimly lit parking alley just off the main road. The nocturnal hum of the city's nightlife drifts through the narrow space, interspersed with distant laughter and the rhythmic crawl of vehicles navigating stop-and-go traffic. Her eyes, tinged with rust, sweep the bustling crowd strolling along the sidewalk, each passerby living in blissful ignorance of the shadows lurking nearby.

Memories of the recent weeks flit through her mind like a swarm of bats catching bugs at dusk. The attack happened so fast that she barely had time to process before she passed out. When she woke, drenched from the morning rain, she found herself sprawled beside a dumpster, its putrid runoff mingling with the dampness of her clothes. The only thing she could remember was his blood red eyes piercing into her soul.

With her mind muddled by anxiety from the previous week's attack, Blythe met up with a guy she met on Lucent, an app tailored for hook-ups. She yearned for an escape, any escape, from the emptiness that consumed her since that moment. In the presence of the arrogant narcissist, however, the void within her only deepened. This wasn't her first time meeting with someone she barely knew, but this time was different.

She didn't mean to kill him. Some inscrutable force within her drove her to act, like a tide compelled by the moon's relentless pull, a victim to its will. His blood flooded her senses, a complex symphony of umami richness with a faint bittersweet undertone that held her fangs captive, urging her to indulge until there was nothing left.

When she finally sobered up, she realized the gravity of the situation, and cleared his phone and his apartment of any trace of her existence.

Now, seated in the shadowy alley, observing the oblivious pedestrians, there's no confusion left in her. The gnawing need twists and churns her stomach, demanding to be appeased once more. She's a Vampire, and she needs blood.

The notion is frightening, yet she's imbued with a sense of tentative exhilaration.

The realization that she had taken a life was harrowing. She couldn't afford a repeat. She needed a method that was sustainable, less lethal, and, above all, discreet.

Tonight, she hopes, will unfold according to plan. It seemed logical on paper, but now, slumped in the driver's seat of her shitty sedan, it feels like a looming abyss, waiting to swallow her into the unknown.

Her foot taps anxiously, nerves gnawing at her as she contemplates executing her plan. The fear of crossing a dangerous line with her potential victim simmers in her mind. She's pushed it too far, evident in the week-long fantasies of feeding on anyone who crossed her path: customers, strangers in clubs, co-workers, and even her angry boss. The hunger gnaws at her core, her whole body tingling with anticipation.

Stepping out of the car, she smooths down her dress, opting for a sleek, knee-length black turtleneck dress, paired with tights and black boots. Clutching her purse, she locks the car door, her grip firm. As she eases into the flow of pedestrians, she blends effortlessly with the crowd.

Two blocks ahead, she reaches the entrance of the bar. Crossing the threshold, a fresh wave of scents envelops her, the unmistakable aroma of human blood. She glides down the bar, choosing a spot in the center to settle.

“Hello there! Welcome to the Wildflower,” the male bartender greets with a bright smile. “I’m Liam. Have you ever been with us before?”

“No,” Blythe responds, her tone a touch distant.

“Well it’s great to have you! We’ve got an open bar, so what’ll you fancy?”

“Can I get a whiskey sour?”

“What whiskey would you like? We’ve got Shadowfire Reserve, Serpent’s Bite, Obsidian Oaks, and Ember Barrel Bourbon. We’ve also got some specialty whiskeys, like Royal Oak Reserve 15 year blend, if you’d like to hear more about those.”

“I’ll take the Serpent’s Bite.” It seems fitting for the situation.

“Got it! I’ll get that for you right away.”

As Liam glides away to prepare her drink, Blythe rests her head in her hand. It might not be the best idea to drink, but she needs something to take the edge off for the night ahead.

As the minutes tick by, couples and groups come and go, hopping from bar to bar. Blythe remains in her spot, her posture rigid, her gaze fixed on the door as if hoping to spot “the one.”

“Waiting for someone? You’ve been here nearly an hour.” Liam interrupts her thoughts, refilling her glass of water.

“I don’t think he’s coming.” She sinks back into the tall chair, eyes fixed on her lap, boots shifting with nervous energy. It’s a lie; no one was ever planning to meet her. She’s simply holding out for the perfect victim to stride through the door and into her clutches. With each passing moment, the likelihood of leaving

empty-handed looms larger. The thought of resorting to the street, like it happened to her, sends shivers down her spine.

“Well, maybe you dodged a bullet. You know, everything happens for a reason.”

Blythe stifles a bitter scoff. Her life is just a twist of cruel circumstance; a curse. She folds her arms and sighs. “I suppose.”

“You’re not a believer?”

She shrugs indifferently, avoiding his gaze and staring towards the door.

“If it’s *not* fate, then tell me: why did you come to this bar, on a night that I happen to be working, and be stood up, if it wasn’t so we had the chance to meet?”

Blythe turns to look at him, a bit surprised. Of course, he’s wrong, but he doesn’t know that. With a charming smile plastered to his face, he asks, “what’s your name?”

Liam seems genuinely kind. A pang of guilt tugs at her, knowing that he doesn’t deserve the encounter she’s contemplating. But the gnawing hunger in her core insists there’s no room for sentiment. She unfolds her arms and reaches for her drink.

“Blythe.”

“Nice to meet you, Blythe. What do you do for work?”

“I’m a server at the Phoenix Tavern.”

“Damn, really? You must bank.”

“I do, but it’s kind of eye opening. I served Elara Winslow once. She’s kind of a bitch.”

Liam begins washing some of the glasses in the sink as he speaks. “Who would’ve thought a celebrity could be an asshole?”

They both chuckle as Blythe takes the last sip of her drink and places it back on the table.

“Do you like your job?” He takes her glass and begins washing it.

“It’s alright, it pays the bills and it’s always busy, so it keeps my mind occupied. What about you?”

“I enjoy being a bartender. I’m always meeting interesting people. I’ve heard some pretty wild stories, too. Do you have any interesting stories to share?”

Blythe’s mind briefly drifts to her most recent, lethal escapade. Her stomach tightens, and she becomes acutely aware of his pale neck, the rhythmic pulse underneath his sun spiral tattoo. He suddenly looks up from washing her glass, eyes locking as he waits for her response. She pulls herself together.

“Um...” Her gaze dances awkwardly around the room for a moment before settling back on his. “Well, I’m kind of in the middle of one right now, I guess, but it’s too early in the making to tell how things will turn out.”

“I hear you,” Liam says, placing her glass on the drying rack. “Life has a funny way of throwing curveballs. I’m looking forward to hearing your story, whenever you’re ready to tell it.”

Blythe bites her bottom lip gently as his crystal eyes harmonize with her own. His smile brightens, revealing a set of flawless, pearly-white teeth. A faint blush tints her cheeks as an inappropriate scene flashes through her mind, and her stomach flares with anticipation. She wonders if it would be too forward to ask if he’s available after work.

“Hey, uh, are you doing anything tonight?” He asks suddenly. “We’re closing in about half an hour... I was thinking, maybe we could get some ice cream?”

The apple falls right into her palms.

“I’d like that,” she smiles.