

Belladonna

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He was halfway through his second drink when he decided that he could kill her and get away with it. Sitting there at the bar with this odd little vixen, an apparent runaway bride of the gothic sort, he listened to her speak but was not hearing her words so much as he was trying to decide how best to dispose of her.

He didn't need to really listen to her to know what she was prattling on about in her intoxicated state. Her fiancé was one of those psychotic, abusive, deadbeat scumbags that cheated on her constantly while constantly accusing her of trying to hook up with other men. She had finally had enough of his stupidity—her blackened left eye was the latest bit of evidence that she hid behind oversized sunglasses—and she had apparently decided to go ahead and make good on his accusations.

This punky-goth girl went by the name of Bella, though it surely wasn't her real name—she looked more like a Lisa or a Liz or something else starting with an "L." That was okay, since he'd lied when he had told her his name was Robert. In fact, he was doing more to hide things about himself than she was in wearing the long

sleeves and sunglasses to hide her bruises. He was sporting colored contact lenses, eyeglasses he'd stolen from the display of an eyeglass store, a backwards baseball cap, and sports-jock clothes that were totally not his personal style. This was his hunting outfit. Bella's outfit was not so much for hunting as for hiding, but she could not hide from him. He saw in her something that even she could not: an opportunity to indulge.

"So, now that you know my whole sob story," she said to him at one point before pointing to the simple wedding band upon his finger, "what's your excuse for being here?"

The wedding band was a fake, too. He wasn't married, couldn't stand the idea of sharing his wealth with a woman that would only squander it, but he knew that wedding bands were undeniable magnets for women seeking a random connection. Any woman that was willing to throw herself knowingly at a married man was surely doing so because she had a need for discretion. Women that gravitated toward married men were most likely married, themselves, or in a committed relationship from which they also sought outside satisfaction.

Bella wore more rings than she had fingers, including two in her right eyebrow and a small silver one in her left nostril—perhaps more in places he could not yet see. But even so, it was not the traditional mark of a taken woman nor her sob story that told him she was someone else's. It was simply her attitude. She knew what she wanted, and she knew where to find it. He was willing to give that to her, along with something else she was surely not expecting at all.

He rattled off a well-rehearsed tale of being a widower, having supposedly lost his young wife to a random car accident, and that he still wore his wedding band in memory of her. The story had worked on quite a few prior occasions, appealing to the emotional sensitivities of his prey, but only on five rare occasions had it led him to an ideal and worthy target. Bella would not be his first, though he knew she would surely be his sixth as he gauged her reaction.

She was clearly moved by the little story. It should have come as no surprise. These goth girls seemed magnetically drawn toward gloom and doom, so a tale of tragedy not only appealed to the emotional impulses of the female mind but also to the thirst for tragedy that chicks of this sort always seemed to hold. He didn't focus on any particular genre of woman, not wanting to establish an easily traced pattern, but Bella's morbid predisposition made her an especially easy mark.

With the initial flirtation done and stories exchanged, now came the heavy second wave where their intentions were made clear. She was stirring her drink and playing with her hair a lot, touching his hand, knee, and shoulder every now and then, and generally giving off nearly every classic positive sign of body language in the book. He thought of some lame invitation—"So, you like horror movies, huh?"—and he was soon paying their bar tab and heading out the door with her latched onto his arm.

He invited her to follow him to his house. Taking her home on his sport motorcycle was impractical and, had he driven his car, using his own vehicle would inevitably leave forensic evidence that could potentially be used to link him to her death. He would dispose of her car later by using it to dispose of her body. Burning the girl's car with her remains inside would cremate any connecting evidence, as it had in each prior instance.

And so they arrived at his house, only a fifteen-minute drive away from the bar he had selected as his hunting grounds for that night. He was glad for the closeness of the bar he'd picked that night. He avoided frequenting the same bar or club more than once within a six-month period, and he sometimes had to drive far across the city to find a suitably anonymous location. He parked his bike in the two-car garage, squeezing it close to the other half of the garage occupied by his luxury SUV so she could pull her car in, too. He could dispose of her body and vehicle at his leisure, as his neighbors would not see the unfamiliar and beat-up Toyota that would have stuck out like a sore thumb in his upscale neighborhood. He closed the garage door and escorted her inside, both of them smiling as they shared completely different expectations for the events that would soon be transpiring.

He decided to make good on his suggestion of a horror movie. He had quite a library of films of practically every genre. His income as a rather successful stock broker had afforded him quite a few luxuries aside from the obvious perks of a nice home and nice vehicles. Wealth equated to freedom in America, true freedom. It allowed one the means to a greater range of worldly pleasures in which to indulge, movies of every sort being one of his own passions.

Bella was immediately impressed by not only the size and design of his home but particularly his home theatre arrangement. He had spared no expense in converting his living room into an environment that was not only on par with the real movie theatre experience but far, far superior to it. After all, one could not pause, rewind, or skip scenes while watching anything in a regular theatre, and few of the theatres that he'd ever been to served alcohol. The freedom to socially interact without the annoyance of other moviegoers was another perk, as it was also especially difficult if not impossible to have full-on intercourse in the middle of a public movie theatre. And even if it were not, his fine black leather sofa was a far more comfortable surface to use for said intercourse than any fold-up theater seating ever could hope to be.

He allowed her to pick a random vampire-themed movie, although he did not particularly care what she picked. He had no intentions of actually paying any attention to the film. He fully expected his attention to be completely consumed by her as he anticipated savoring the initial glory of his already successful hunt. She seemed equally excited, and she was as ambivalent about the movie as he, for she spent perhaps not even fifteen seconds in picking it from his library before handing it to him. He asked if she wished for any popcorn; instead, her request for more alcohol was an even more pleasing response. The more intoxicated he could get her, the easier it all would be for both of them.

He was inclined to go for something a bit more sophisticated like a top-shelf brandy, something good for sipping through the film on the way toward more exciting activities, but she immediately prompted him for cheaper booze. With a shrug, he produced an unopened bottle of some rather inexpensive spiced rum that he had been keeping in his cabinet for such an occasion ... although he had long been expecting to be opening this for a holiday gathering with family members or co-workers, instead.

The movie was already playing as he poured them both a double apiece in his favorite tumblers. She downed it without even flinching at its potency. She was a

seasoned drinker, this Bella. He poured her another double, and she raised it to him for a toast.

“To the scary things that go bump in the night,” Bella said, “and to the other things that bump uglies.”

It was weird, but what the hell. He went along with it. Glasses clinked, and more rum disappeared. Not wanting to get completely sloshed, he suggested mixing their rum with some cola. She immediately nodded in agreement. He went to the kitchen to grab a few cans of soda, figuring four would be sufficient, and he filled a bowl with ice to add to their tumblers. When he returned to the den, he found that she had inserted a thin, twisty, decorative drinking straw into each of their tumblers. Presumably, she had kept them from the drinks she had been sipping upon at the bar. She had seemed to enjoy nibbling upon the ends of her straws as a nervous habit. Bella had taken off her sunglasses and helped herself to more of the rum, though she was sipping at this serving now, rather than gulping it down in a single throw.

Sitting down next to her and glancing over his shoulder as he dropped some ice in their glasses and prepared to mix their drinks, he was stricken by Bella’s visual allure. He had initially thought her name was one of those corny goth-girl references to the old poison substance of belladonna, but perhaps “Bella” was simply a vain reference to her own beauty. And, oh, what a beauty she was!

She was petite and slender, almost dainty. Between her slightly pointed ears, delicate jaw line, and her shoulder-length hair that was so heavily dyed that it looked fake, she looked like she was dressed as some kind of dark faerie for Halloween, minus the wings. Her eyes were a shade of brown so dark that they were positively black in the dim light of the evening. Her skin was a rather ghostly yet not unhealthy pale tone—probably because she was a redhead, judging by the color of her eyebrows. And her lips, though rather thin, were shaped with an almost naturally pursed sort of look that readily invited kissing.

With the ice added to the rum already in the tumblers, there was only enough room in the glasses to add cola just for coloring rather than real flavor. That was fine. Bella sipped at hers and gave a hum of approval; he pulled out the straw she’d put into his and dropped it on the table before taking a long pull of his drink. He wasn’t planning on having much more to drink, himself, but he certainly planned on feeding her more booze. Oddly, Bella snickered as she watched him gulp down half of his drink. He turned to stare at her for a few moments, not only perplexed by her giggling but also fascinated by the sight of her.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I dunno. I’m just pretty buzzed. By the way, you’re cute.”

“Cute? What, like a bunny rabbit?”

“No, not like a bunny,” she said, shaking her head. “More like... a deer.”

“A deer, huh?” he responded. “What, with like horns and all that?”

“Yeah. Lots of horns... like a big ol’ buck,” she agreed. She set aside her drink and leaned close to him, almost daring him. “You wanna buck around?”

He submitted to that invitation, kissing her briefly at first, teasingly. She responded by practically feeding upon his mouth with a passionate return of affection. She was all over him, pawing at his chest, nearly ripping his T-shirt off,

and fumbling about for the buttons of his jeans. This was way, way too easy. He didn't have to coax her or try to seduce her at all. She just wanted him.

Maybe it was the many signs of his wealth, maybe it was his fake story about being a widower, or maybe it was just because she really was seeking to hook up with someone to get back at her lover. Whatever the case, Bella was trying to dominate him. To anyone else, and for him at any other time, this would have been wonderful. On this particular occasion, however, this was not what he wanted.

He tried pushing back, tried exerting control over her. She powered right back, grabbing his wrists and guiding his hands to her breasts as he had tried to push her away by her thin shoulders. For such a small gal, she was a strong one. But very quickly, faster than even he expected, he became impatient—probably a symptom of the alcohol. Enough was enough. The sex wasn't what he was after. It would have been a nice bonus, but it was looking like she wasn't going to let him do things the way he wanted. She wasn't playing his game the right way.

Okay, so he would skip a few steps. He had been planning on getting her in the shower and slitting her throat—nice and clean, blood down the drain, no muss, no fuss—but he had already done that before. As though by simple instinct, his hands pulled away from her breasts and went right for her throat, his fingers closing around her slender neck with vise-like pressure.

No, this would be better. He hadn't done this before. Variety was the spice of life. And that was, of course, the point to all of this: adding a bit of spice to his own life by creatively taking the lives of others.

Bella was, of course, just as surprised as he was to find him suddenly throttling the life out of her. By some fantastic coincidence, a scene in the movie playing on his widescreen plasma television showed a vampire holding a woman aloft by her neck with one hand, turning her face aside as he prepared to bite her neck. With Bella, of course, he had no intentions of biting her—that would simply leave a mark upon her that could be matched to his dental records. No, he was content just to choke the life out of this dark sprite, to watch her eyes go wide with shock and feel her squirming about beneath him. It was different, to say the least, and far more intimate than merely shooting or stabbing someone to death.

His thumbs dug into her windpipe with enough pressure that she could barely even manage to squeak. He had no worries about little Bella screaming loudly enough for his neighbors to hear... not that it would have been audible outside of his heavily-insulated home, anyway. He had set up his home theatre in such a way as to allow himself the pleasure of being able to crank up the volume as loud as he pleased without disturbing his neighbors. Previously, he had put on a couple of different slasher flicks at full volume and then walked outside to see for himself how far the sound would travel. Even right outside of the closed front door, he could barely discern the sound of a roaring chainsaw or a woman's ear-splitting shriek of terror.

Alas, Bella was a fighter. She curled the thin fingers of her hands into fists and pummeled his forearms and shoulders while getting her legs underneath herself and attempting to stand upon the sofa. He was not only stronger than her, he was also a bit quicker. He still had control of the situation. He followed her up as she arose, standing taller than her by at least a foot, and he threw her over the back of

the sofa, turning the expensive bit of furniture over in doing so. He tried to keep his hands around her throat, and she similarly kept both of her hands upon his wrists as she kept trying to pry them away. As such, she could do nothing to control her fall, and he wound up slamming her down onto the hardwood floor, flat upon her back.

The impact either knocked the wind from her or banged her head enough to daze her. Her eyes closed for a moment and her hands fell free from his wrists. He took that opportunity to straddle her waist, draw back his fists, and pound her squarely with three quick blows—right, left, right. Bella went completely limp after the second blow, so the third was just for good measure.

He sat there for a moment or two with his hands up and ready, trying to decide whether he wanted to pummel her to death or resume strangling her. He sat there for a moment, catching his breath and watching her closely, trying to decide which of the two would suit his desires better. Then, it hit him. She was out. She was his. Sure, she would probably wake again in awhile, but for the time being, she was completely subdued. He hadn't afforded himself this sort of an opportunity before. He could do whatever he wanted to her now.

Well, on second thought, not anything. No, he wasn't like that. Again, he wasn't looking for sex and, again, it would've been a major bonus if he'd been able to restrain himself enough to accept it before this happened. But truthfully, he was no rapist. He'd never wanted to force himself upon a woman before because, really, he'd never actually been that desperate. Women had always been more than willing to throw themselves at him in the first place. And he didn't kill for some kind of sick sexual thrill, either. Instead, he simply wanted to be there for the moment, that all-important transition from life into death. He wanted to bask in the rush that was the glorious knowledge that he was the catalyst of that change, to know that he had that power. Yes, that was the kicker, the hook. That was what made it all worthwhile.

Death was just... weird. Even after the things he'd done before, it was still infinitely fascinating. He'd been hooked on it for ages. Bugs when he was a boy, small animals as a teenager, and finally humans in his early twenties. It was simply amazing that someone or something could go from a living, breathing, thinking creature and then, later, be an utterly still, inanimate thing, a cadaver. A corpse was simply an empty shell of sorts that resembled the former living being. The whole concept was just fascinatingly wild.

Death seemed even stranger with humans because the change seemed so much more profound. A grasshopper was just a thing from the start, just a little machine driven by a program of simple reflexes and ultra-basic motivations. A rabbit was just a cute, fluffy creature that operated purely upon instinct, not much more than a bigger, fuzzier version of a bug. Animals didn't dream and love, or at least nothing at all like people. They couldn't sit there and hold a conversation and share a few drinks, watch a movie, and then share some intimate minutes of a fiery and passionate embrace. And with just the pull of a trigger or the stroke of a blade, the spill of some blood... it could be gone, all gone.

He'd never really had a full opportunity to study the transition in detail with a human being, not really. Bella would be his first exception. He was glad he chose her. He always chose women because they were easier to lure in, easier to

overpower if necessary, and... well, he wasn't gay, so obviously the opportunity for sex with a woman before killing them was a plus. Well, it was a shame he wouldn't have the proper opportunity to indulge in that opening act with Bella. If he'd simply waited until afterward, then he could have choked her out. But at least he could better savor the main event. He made a mental note to try to control himself better on his future hunts. These experiences were already rare enough, so he had to make the most of every single one of them.

Assured that she was unconscious for the time being, he stepped around the sofa and downed both of the drinks left sitting upon the table. Yeah, it was a decent amount of booze, but he could handle it. His tongue was getting a bit dry and pasty with his excitement, anyway. The soda helped to wet his whistle for the time being. He had a lot of work ahead of him. The sooner he had her fully secured, the sooner he could really relax and do all of this at his leisure.

It took him a bit of time to think of something adequate with which to tie up his catch. A quick run to the garage netted a rope, but not enough by his estimate to secure both her hands and her feet. Furthermore, he needed something to use as a gag to keep her quiet in the event that she regained consciousness... and she could awaken at any given moment, a realization that hastened him all the more. He was so caught up with excitement that he was in a state of near-panic. He could hardly think straight at all. He had thought it all out before, and this wasn't his first hunt. Why would he start losing his head now?

He was halfway up the stairs, heading for the bedroom, when he was stricken by a sudden wave of nausea and dizziness. He wasn't used to drinking that much, that fast—more of a sippin' kind of guy when it came to booze. He initially just waved it off as being the rum, bouncing off the hallway walls clumsily on his way to the bedroom. As he headed for the dresser drawer to fetch one of his pistols, some socks, and a couple of leather belts, the effects of dizziness and nausea worsened with startling quickness.

What had he eaten earlier? Was it the fast food he had devoured before heading out? No, if this was food poisoning, he sure would've felt it sooner. Maybe his liver was finally letting him know that he'd been beating it up a bit too much? He slammed the dresser drawer shut and turned around to head out the door... and then the room kept on spinning, even when his feet stopped moving.

"Not good," he muttered to himself as he staggered into the master bathroom.

His dizziness far outweighed his nausea by then. The tingle he felt within his belly was not so much akin to a real need to throw up as much as it was simply in response to the intensity of his sudden vertigo. His heart was thudding in his chest ferociously, his hands were shaky, and he felt the fine beads of a cold, freakishly sudden sweat oozing from every pore of his skin. His pulse had already been quickened by his brief struggle with Bella, but it had never slowed down since then, and it was now even quicker still.

"Panic attack" was the first thing that came to mind. Why now? Why? He didn't have anything about which to panic. Things were cool. He had a handle on this. He had this all under control. All he had to do was head back down there, get her all laced up, and then he could sit back and chill for awhile as he decided what to do with her. Nothing to get worried about, nothing worth freaking out, and

certainly nothing he hadn't already done before—nothing that warranted this kind of a reaction.

He couldn't bring himself to vomit, even when he tried. He gave up on the idea, dragging himself to his feet, and moved over to the sink. He splashed some cold water upon his face, hoping it might help him sober up a bit. That move was a mistake. No sooner had he arisen than he just as quickly found himself falling over sideways to the floor, dropping clumsily like a wasted frat boy. This was no buzz. This wasn't even drunkenness. He knew it now. He remembered Bella with her straws in the drinks. She'd drugged him! The little whore had poisoned him!

He had to crawl out of the bathroom, through the bedroom, and out into the hallway, moving on all fours before he could even attempt to bring himself to stand up. Using both walls of the hallway for support, he stuffed his pistol into the waistband of his jeans and clumsily managed to make his way down the hall. He knocked off pictures of friends and family as he made his way along. He cursed under his breath as he saw a couple of the frames crack and shatter upon hitting the carpeted floor. What the hell had she given him? Why had she drugged him?

Money, he realized, was the motivation. He'd tried perhaps a bit too hard to impress Bella with his wealth, never counting on the idea that she might be the type to spike his drink and rob him blind while he was either unconscious or dead. In fact, she probably intended to call over some friends with a moving truck to clean him out while he was unconscious. Sneaky, sneaky little seductress!

Well, to hell with that. He was still on his own two feet. He was going to get her first. Actually, he already had gotten her, but he was going to finish her before she could finish him. He was going to put a bullet in that pretty head of hers, right where she lay upon the hardwood floor behind the sofa. He didn't care what kind of evidence it would leave behind. He was running out of time. If he was only going to pass out, then she would surely wake before him, and then she would have a free run at everything in his place. And if she had poisoned him with something lethal, then he wanted to make damned sure that she wasn't going to get away with it. Who knew how many other guys she'd victimized with this little scam of hers? Of course, he'd been trying to scam her out of her life at the same time, but at least his motivation was simple curiosity rather than blatant greed. Becoming intimately acquainted with the circumstances of life and death seemed like a much more noble cause than boosting one's income.

By the time he made it to the head of the stairs, his vision was blurring terribly. He looked over the banister and down into the living room. Squinting his eyes, he could barely discern the form of Bella's slender, shapely legs protruding from behind the overturned sofa. Presumably, she was still unconscious. That was a shame. He wanted her to see this coming, wanted her to know she was going to die before he actually pulled the trigger. This wasn't about his fascination with the Great Transition anymore. Now, this was all about getting even. This was about getting his before she could get hers.

He clung to the banister rail and tried to ease himself down the stairs. Right away, he knew it wasn't going to go well. He managed the first couple of stairs just fine, but as his vision became an almost impossible blur, with blackness creeping around the edges, he realized he wasn't going to have time. He had one chance, perhaps only seconds left. He figured that he could just slide down the stairs—

clumsy, stupid, probably funny to watch, but necessary. And so he let go of the rail to give it a try, estimating he would have time to hop up, scramble over, and pop Bella in the forehead before he totally lost it. His estimation, alas, was grossly inaccurate.

He tumbled down the stairs like one of those cars he'd seen cartwheeling down a steep hill in an action film. Unlike one of those cars, however, he didn't explode into a giant fireball when he got to the bottom. Everything just went black.

He was surprised and grateful to eventually find himself returning to consciousness. His head, shoulders, and right knee ached terribly, probably from the stairs. Wow—he actually remembered falling down the stairs? Well, perhaps that did make sense. It had been the drug that had knocked him out, not the fall.

He couldn't see. Something covered his eyes. Attempting to cry out in alarm, he found that he could not speak, either. A gag had been tied into place in his mouth—something cloth, maybe a sock. He was seated in a chair, but unable to stand up. His ankles were bound to the chair's legs and his wrists were tied behind his back.

Being blind, mute, and bound was the least of his worries, however. What bothered him the most, and what had been responsible for rousing him from his drugged slumber in the first place, was the sensation of something cold and wet being splashed upon him... and then smelling gasoline.

Frantically, knowing what was about to happen, he thrashed about in the chair and screamed for all his worth. This wasn't how it was supposed to work! He'd been so careful, so methodical! He was the one that had put in all the hours, all of the work, all the research, and all the patience in setting this up. He was the one that had done all the legwork. He was the one that should be benefiting from it all, instead of...

The blindfold was jerked away from his eyes abruptly, causing him to squint against the glare of the brightness of the lights. It was her, Bella, standing right in front of him. Looking around with wide eyes of panic, he could see that she had set him up in the middle of his living room. She set down a large red plastic jug. It made a hollow thud as it touched the hardwood floor. He recognized it as the gas can from his garage that he used to fill his lawnmower. As best he could recall, the thing had been almost full; now, from the sound of it, the can was pretty much empty.

"Five gallons sure covers a lot of household," Bella commented as she adjusted the blue rubber gloves she now wore upon her hands.

She switched on the digital video camera she had set up with a tripod in front of him, adjusting its gaze to focus directly upon his face. He demanded to know what she wanted, why was doing this, and what the hell she wanted him to do. Apparently having anticipated this, she simply held up the dry-erase board that she had taken off the kitchen refrigerator. She pointed to the message that she had written upon it:

YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES. CONFESS OR BURN.

The red LED light of the camera glared at him, almost as though the camera, itself, was demanding a confession from him. This was insane. This wasn't right. It wasn't fair! This was torture, plain and simple! He'd never tortured anyone. That

wasn't his style. He killed, but he didn't rape, and he didn't torture. He had rules. He wasn't an animal. He was just curious. And curiosity, of course, had killed the cat... and maybe him, too.

He considered it for a few moments, weighing his options. Well, really, there were only two options: confess or burn. Sure seemed simple enough. One option was to play it tough, give her nothing, and hope she didn't have the gall to actually torch him... only to find out that he was wrong. That was a stupid option.

Bella wasn't weak. She was cold, every bit as cold as he was. Hell, she had been the one to drug him. She was the one that had gotten a leg up on him in this situation. He respected her now... and realized he should have respected her before as well. He dared not underestimate her again by calling her bluff.

The other choice was to spill his guts. Of course, it was obvious what she wanted. She knew. She had to know what he was all about, that this was nothing new to him. The way he had attacked her, so suddenly and without provocation, she had to have known that he had been planning all along to kill her. And she had to know that he was the type that would likely do this again, if he hadn't already done it before (which he had). So, what Bella wanted was a confession to hand over to the police. She would let them mete out justice as the courts saw fit.

Well, for sure, that would mean prison time. He could afford the best lawyers there were, but nobody could get him off the hook for everything, not if they had a videotaped confession. And his confession would have to be real, of course. He couldn't assume that he would be able to rattle off some irrelevant details to Bella and hope that she'd just accept them as the truth. Again, he dared not underestimate her twice. Besides, the idea of finally telling someone else everything that he had done was kind of exciting in a way. All these years, he'd been keeping it all to himself, never able to see just how someone else would react to hearing everything that he had done.

So, yeah, he could confess. Go ahead, let her use it against him in court. He would do prison, but he could live through it. It had been worth it. He had already experienced more in life than most people would ever experience in several lifetimes. They wouldn't give him the death penalty, not with his lawyers. Even if they did, it would take decades for them to actually carry it out, at which point he'd be so old that an execution would be more like a mercy killing. It was an unpleasant future, but perhaps inevitable. He'd considered the possibility of it many times in the past, even before he carried out his first hunt. He had always known the risks involved. He'd expected to be caught eventually; however, he hadn't expected to face being burned alive by one of his victims.

So then, after a brief hesitation, he confessed. He spilled it all, speaking quickly, trying to cram as much detail into the time allotted as he figured he could afford. He told her (and the camera) about all six of the women he'd murdered, about how he had lured them in, how he had killed them, and how he had disposed of their bodies. He even went so far as to explain why he'd done it. He hoped to make her understand that he wasn't some sick pervert that got his jollies from sexually violating dead bodies. He wasn't some lowly scumbag that picked up hookers and dumped their mutilated remains in a river because he had childhood abuse issues with his mother. He threw it all out there, laid all his cards down on the table. He gave it all until he had nothing left to give.

At last, he shrugged after sitting in silence for a few moments in conclusion. “So, there you have it. Now... what happens next?”

She had been standing with her arms folded as she’d watched him. Now, she turned the camera away from him for a moment, walked over to him, and put the sock gag back into position. She hadn’t actually stopped the recording, so obviously she wanted to keep her identity secret for some reason. With the gag back in place, she then aimed the camera at him again, picked up the dry-erase board, and wiped off its prior message... or at least the majority of it. She held it up for him to read again. He read it. His heart sank. She had left only one word:

BURN

He screamed.

Bella took the camera with her, still recording, and walked over to the door leading into the attached garage. She reached in through the open window of his luxury SUV, unclipped the remote from its visor, and used it to open the garage door. He was still screaming, wailing even louder now with the hopes that the open door would allow his cries to be heard. It was a stupid assumption, thinking anyone would be awake and outside to hear his muffled cries at three o’clock in the morning—he probably couldn’t even be heard one room over within the same house.

Bella set the camera’s tripod down so that she could aim the camera into the house, still clearly able to view him. For obvious reasons, she made sure that she remained behind the camera at all times, completely out of view. She went around, started her car, and let it idle as she came back around to the doorway one last time. She stared at him for a moment, watching as he pleaded through his gag for her to let him go, to not do what he knew she was going to do. She just shook her head, the faintest hint of a smirk curving her pretty dark burgundy lips.

Bella produced a small book of disposable matches that she’d taken out of her car. She struck one, used it to set the others alight, and gave him a small wave goodbye before tossing the flaming matchbook over the camera and into the house. A splash of gasoline was visible upon the hardwood floor. The vapors ignited with a pretty blue wash of flame that swiftly spread into the house, crawling along the floor with a beautiful fluid motion. The flames reached the nearly empty gasoline can sitting a few feet in front of him. He screamed his last.

She backed out of the driveway, used the stolen remote to close the garage door, and watched it go down slowly as the orange glow of the flames glared visibly through the front windows of the house. She drove away calmly, quietly, and sedately. Spinning the tires and gunning the engine would only attract the neighbors’ attention, drawing their attention to the house that would soon be completely engulfed in flames. The sooner the fire department was called, the less time he would have to burn.

During the drive home, she removed the gloves and pulled off the wig, fluffing her natural red hair. The wig had been terribly itchy, and she was glad to be done with it. She used a tissue from her purse to wipe away the makeup she’d used to fake her bruises. The punches she had sustained would leave real ones, and for those she would need different makeup to hide them. She didn’t want her

roommate to ask any more questions than she already was going to, what with her being out so late and all.

She crept into her apartment, took a shower, and rejoiced in finding that her roommate was still soundly asleep when she got out. She drank a few cups of coffee as she waited for sunrise. At exactly seven o'clock in the morning, she left. The drive was short and the trek was familiar, but this would be the last time she would ever make this visit. She didn't know if she would be investigated or charged for what she had done, but she didn't care. The end justified the means. The consequences were irrelevant.

She entered the memorial garden just as the caretakers were opening the gates for their normal daytime hours. She drove to that same spot, the one she'd visited every Saturday for the past five years, and she parked. She weaved her way between the headstones and grave markers until she reached that one lonely, humble, simple granite marker. She had brought along the same two tumblers she had saved from the house before she'd left, along with the bottle of rum. She poured a double into each glass. She set one glass upon the grave and clinked the other glass against it, raising it in a toast.

"Cheers, sis," she declared before she drank. "I finally found him."

