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IMMORTAL

LOVE STORIES WITH **BITE**

Edited by New York Times bestselling author

P.C. CAST

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Haunted Love](#)

[Amber Smoke](#)

[Dead Man Stalking - A Morganville Vampires Story](#)

[Table Manners](#)

[Blue Moon](#)

[Changed](#)

[Binge](#)

[Free - A Story of Evernight](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

Immortal

LOVE STORIES WITH BITE



EDITED BY
P. C. CAST

with Leah Wilson



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Introduction

P. C. CAST

So . . . just what the hell is it with you teenagers and vampires? Huh? Okay, I have my suspicions. As with any mature, reasoning adult over the age of thirty who is also a parent, my natural inclination is to believe their allure has to do with . . . well . . . sex. I mean, come on! I'll admit to reading *Interview with a Vampire* the year it was released. I won't mention that year so as not to frighten you with my advanced age, but I will say I was sixteen the first time I read the book, and I was definitely tantalized and titillated by the overt sexuality of Anne Rice's vamps.

But while I'm taking this trip way back down Memory Lane, I find that I need to admit to more than just my age. If I'm being honest with myself, and with you, I have to add that the allure of the vampire is much more complex than simple lust. The truth is that vampire appeal goes beyond raging hormones and our baser emotions. I devoured Anne Rice's book and then went on to absorb Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's amazing *Chronicles of Saint Germain* not just because they were sexy—that's way too simplistic a reason. I got hooked on vampires as a teenager because I identified with them.

About now my adult readers are shaking their heads and thinking, *Cast has lost it . . . again.*

It does sound bizarre. How could a teenager in the '70s, or the 2000s for that matter, "identify" with vampires? Okay, stay with me here. When I was a teenager I understood vamps deep in my soul because, at the very core of my hormone-filled being, I believed I was immortal too. Actually, it was such an innate belief, one that went so hand-in-hand with zits and driver's ed, boy angst and prom, that it wasn't until I looked back in retrospect that I realized what really drew me to absorb all the vampire mythos I could get my hands on.

Think about it. The sensuality and allure of vampires must go beyond biting and blood. Come on. Neither of those things is particularly enticing, even when you add a hot, brooding guy or a sexy chick to the mix. But sprinkle in the ability to live practically forever and to be frozen physically in time so that you don't have to age, and you have a whole new thing. Vampires rebel against time, and they win! Teenagers get that. Because isn't rebelling against time, whether "time" is represented by wrinkles or a parent's disciplinary hand or death itself, what being a teenager is all about?

Of course it is. Or at least it mostly is.

Hopefully you're nodding and grinning and thinking, *Cast hasn't lost it. She's old, sure, but she hasn't lost it. Yet.*

Is it any wonder *Buffy* became such a phenomenon? On one hand, she personified the immediacy of being a teenager. Everything was so deliciously now with Buffy and the Scooby gang. For them, every day really might have been the end of the world. On the other hand, Buffy seemed invulnerable, even to herself, even after she'd died—twice! And who did she fall in love with? Vampires, of course. Yes.

Buffy had mortal boyfriends, but she struggled with the fact that it never seemed to work with regular guy her own age (and species). The characters of Angel and Spike were old, and admittedly monsters, but Buffy identified and fell in love with them instead. Why? (I mean, besides the fact that they were both so *fiiiiine*.) As vampires, they symbolized everything that Buffy, as a teenage girl, believed would always be exclusively hers: immortal youth and the possibility of forever. And it worked! Spike and Angel hooked the audience along with Buffy, and whether we were fifteen or fifty, we wanted to be with them too—to share in the allure of attainable immortality and forever love.

It's a theme I play with in my own young adult vampyre series, the *House of Night*, which I coauthor with my daughter, Kristin. In our books the teenage heroine, Zoey Redbird, is changing lives and worlds—moving from her human existence to enter the world of vampyres, where she will make the Change into an adult vamp, or die. During this Change Zoey struggles to maintain a relationship with her human boyfriend. In that struggle she's really saying that she isn't ready to fully embrace the magic and passion and forever-ness vampyres symbolize. At the same time, she's inexorably drawn to the allure of the vampyre, which is best represented in the characters of Erik Night and James Stark, whom she glimpses the possibility of forever. In later HoN books, add the presence of the mystic fallen angel, Kalona—who is, indeed, literally immortal—and the teenage angst as well as allure really cranked up. It's scary for Zoey, but it also attracts her, just as it attracts the books' readers.

I think that's something else about the vampire mythos teenagers can especially identify with—the sense of fear that goes along with the promise of forever. It's much like the bittersweet fear you feel as you contemplate leaving home for the first time. It's something you desire—something you look forward to and dream about—but there's also a frightening sense of take-this-step-and-nothing-will-ever-be-the-same about it. And yet even that fear itself is exciting, compelling. Vampires carry the same sense of excitement about them. Sure, we can all push through our hesitation and reach for immortality, but perhaps only teens are willing to truly embrace it, because you're used to the big question mark that is the future and you still believe forever can be attained—that youth can really conquer death and love can be victorious over age and apathy.

Because that's really the heart of youth, isn't it? It's the magical possibility of forever that opens before all of us as young adults. When you're a teenager you've become old enough to see the promise of adulthood, you can practically touch the allure of freedom and the mystery of imagining what is to come, but you're also still young enough to believe that you can move through that future without changing, without losing yourself and turning into scary cloned versions of your parents.

And that's what the vampires we fall in love with struggle to do too. No matter the mythos, whether we're lost in the world of Lestat, Edward and Bella, Angel and Buffy, or even my fabulous Zoey Redbird, our immortal enchanters all strive to maintain sense of self and find lasting love over the long stretches of their lives. In these struggles they take us with them and, perhaps, the journey is more magically real for those of you who are still young.

Come with me, will you? Let's pass through the realm of immortals again. I was dazzled by the variety and richness of the stories the wonderful authors in this anthology created. It is always a pleasure to visit Rachel Caine's Morganville, and a familiar joy to be seduced by the magic of Tani Lee's unique voice and vision. I was a proud mom, smiling at Kristin Cast's world in which vampyres were created by the ancient Furies, as well as a satisfied reader. The conclusion of Claudia Gray's pre-Civil War story had me cheering. In "Haunted Love" I was pleasantly surprised by Cynthia Leitich-Smith's plot twists and turns. Richelle Mead's "Blue Moon" made me breathless. Nancy Holder

post-apocalyptic vision took me on a wild, scary ride, and Rachel Vincent's vampiric siren was a cool addition to our mythos.

I invite you to join me in reading the magic within these pages. We'll be mesmerized by the allure of the vampire together, and by doing so—even if just temporarily—we'll all attain a measure of immortality.

Haunted Love

CYNTHIA LEITICH SMITH

On my way to work, I pass the worn-out white cottage where I lived as a little kid. The windows are boarded up. So is the door. I expect it'll be put up for auction. I expect it'll go cheap. Nobody's moving to Spirit, Texas.

Every year, the high school grads pack up and leave—one or two for college, the rest for jobs in bigger towns. And every other week, a crowd gathers at the funeral parlor to pay their respects to one of the old folks. Death is the most lucrative business in town.

It seems like everyone dies or leaves. But I'm not going anywhere. Spirit is home. It's the little piece of the world that makes sense to me, which, lately, is saying a lot.

"Cody!" calls a bright, female voice from behind me.

I ignore her. I've never been a talkative kind of guy.

"Cody Stryker!" exclaims the teenage daughter of the new mayor—the one who's going to turn the empty store-fronts into antique shops and the abandoned houses into bed-and-breakfasts and offices in Spirit a future again, or so he says. "Wait," she pleads. "I need to talk to you."

I pause, turn. Did I say nobody moves here? The girl standing in front of me this evening is an exception to that rule. Last fall, Ginny Augustine and her folks arrived in Spirit after the bank foreclosed on their home in The Woodlands.

Typically, you have to live in town for at least a year before running for office, but nobody else wanted the job, so the city council passed a waiver and Mr. Augustine ran unopposed.

My glare falls to Ginny's hand on my sleeve.

She snatches it back. "I don't believe we've met before. I'm—"

"I know who you are." I begin walking again. Glancing at her sideways, I ask, "What do you want?"

I feel a faint flash of guilt when she blinks, startled. "Well," Ginny begins again, "someone's cranky. Here's the deal: I'm going to handle ticket sales for you. Cool, huh?" When I don't reply, she adds, "You know, at the theater. Movies? Tickets?"

For the first time in more than fifty years, the Old Love Theater will open tonight at 8 P.M. After Uncle Dean's death, I sold off a third of his cattle, his antique gun, and his fishing boat to make the down payment. None of it was worth much, but neither is the Old Love.

It's reassuring to have somewhere to be on a night-tonight basis, though, to have another purpose beyond satisfying my thirst. To have something else to think about besides the night I faced down my uncle for the last time.

I keep going, trying to ignore how Ginny falls in step by my side.

At sixteen, she's girl-next-door pretty, medium height and curvy. Her teeth are even and pearl-

white. Long, honey-blond hair frames her friendly face. What with the powder blue baby T that reads ~~sassy in rhinestones~~ and her faded denim cutoffs, Ginny looks like she was born and bred in Spirit like a real small-town girl.

When we reach the theater, she persists in following me around back.

Ginny leans against the door, coy, as I fish my keys out of my jeans pocket.

“Big night,” she observes. “You nervous?”

“No,” I lie, unlocking the deadbolt. Once inside, I add, “And I’m not hiring.”

“Really?” Ginny asks, shoving a sandal-clad foot in the doorway. “You mean you’re going to run the projector, pop the corn, restock the concession stand, ring up food and drinks, vacuum the carpets, change the toilet paper, and do . . . whatever managers do—paperwork and bills—all by yourself? Think about it, cowboy. How do you plan to sell tickets and handle concessions at the same time?”

On one hand, I don’t want to encourage her. On the other, I don’t need any trouble from her leaving me pissed off. I don’t need trouble—period. I wish she would just take off. “I’m not opening the concession stand.”

“Well, there go your profits! You’re charging—what?—three bucks a show? I know people around here are cheap, but do you have any idea what, say, electricity alone is going to cost? It’s summer. It’s Texas. Think: air conditioning.”

Honestly, I hadn’t considered that. It’s not like I have an MBA or anything. I just graduated from high school a couple of weeks ago. I used to mow lawns in the summer, but this will be my first real job off the ranch. I may have been over-ambitious.

“Plus,” Ginny goes on, “insurance, taxes, and you might want to advertise the place as a tourist attraction. The founders of Spirit were key players in the early days of the Republic, and historic tourism is becoming—”

“Enough.” She’s a politician’s daughter, all right. Opening the door wider, knowing I’ll regret it, I say, “Come in. We’ll talk.”

Ginny quiets as I lead her through the service hallway. It is hot in here. Muggy.

I wonder what, if anything, she knows about the building’s tragic history, its lingering reputation. A teenage girl—Sonia Mitchell—was found dead in a storage closet in 1959. Another girl, Katherine something-or-other—Vogel maybe—went missing for good. She was new in town, like Ginny, and her body was never found. Both girls worked at the theater. And again, like Ginny, both girls were sixteen.

Everyone hereabouts has heard the story. Partiers have busted in over the years, too, and every now and then a whole pack would run out hollering about a ghost.

There’s no denying that the theater has an eerie quality to it. Over the past week, I’ve seen the letter “S” written in the dust and wiped it away again and again. Once or twice, I could’ve sworn I heard a soft voice coming from somewhere in the building. Enticing, musical, feminine . . . I’m starting to hear it in my dreams.

As Ginny and I enter the lobby, I don’t give her the satisfaction of cranking the air conditioning immediately.

Instead, I take in my new business, trying to see it the way tonight’s customers will. It’s a grand old place with a huge antique crystal chandelier, built when cotton was king. Granted, the gold and crimson wallpaper is faded, and the blood-red carpet is worn. So are the red upholstered seats in the screening room—both on the main floor and up in the balconies. But there’s still a romance to the place, a whisper of the past.

Besides, my mom loved it. Every time we passed by, she'd say the Old Love was a ghost of the glory days of Spirit, a reminder of who we'd been and could become again.

"Do you know how to run a register?" I ask Ginny, gesturing.

She's already playing with it. I only have one, set at the ticket counter. It's an older model that I ordered off eBay.

"Hmm," Ginny says, scanning the lobby before brightening. "I know! We can lay out candy and popcorn on the counter, post prices, and provide a box with a slot in it so that people can pay on the honor system. Like at the library for folks with fines on overdue books."

That wouldn't work in most places. In Spirit, it'll do fine.

"There are some boxes in my office," I say, impressed despite myself. After a pause, I add, "Why do you want this job anyway?"

Ginny shrugs. "I could use the money."

That makes two of us. The thing about living forever, I suddenly need a long-term financial plan. And, I realize, so far as Ginny is concerned, there aren't any other jobs within walking distance. I bet she used to have a flashy car. I bet it was repossessed.

I can't help wondering if there's more to her being here than that. Not to be conceited, but I'm fairly good-looking. I've got Mom's blue eyes, and they stand out against my deep brown skin, slick black hair, and the sharp features I inherited from whoever was my dad. I'm wiry but solid enough from working on Uncle Dean's ranch.

Outside Spirit, girls are always flirting, not that I know what to say back.

The locals, on the other hand, they pity me. When my mom died, everyone said what a shame it was for me to be orphaned at only ten. They saw my bruises in the years that followed. And they knew what Uncle Dean was like.

For a long time, I thought sooner or later somebody would report him to social services—preacher, a teacher, the school nurse—but it never happened.

I guess most folks were as scared of Uncle Dean as I was.

Ginny is looking at me with an oddly knowing smile, and I realize she's waiting for my decision. I can't help thinking she may be useful. I can't help wondering if she has a boyfriend. But spending quality time around that flesh-and-blood girl is intrinsically problematic. The flesh is a problem. The blood is a problem. At any given moment, it's a toss-up which is worse. "Okay," I say. "You're hired."

The chandelier rattles, distracting us both.

"Drafty," Ginny says, glancing around. "But where's it coming from?"

She asks too many questions. "I turned on the air conditioner."

It's a lie.



After a ridiculous amount of negotiation, I agree to ten cents above minimum wage, send Ginny home to change into a white button-down shirt, black slacks, and black shoes, and tell her to come back in a couple of hours.

Unlocking the door to my cramped office, I'm less than thrilled to realize that I may need to hire

second person. Someone local. Quiet.

Within the next few years, I need to sew up an understanding with the good people of Spirit. They may not know what I am, but they'll figure it out over time. On the off chance that Ginny's daddy "revitalization" plan works, I'll be here for generations. I need to reassure them that my presence is no more threatening than the fact that Edwina Labarge collects snow globes or that Betty Mueller talks to her dead husband or that Miss Josefina and Miss Abigail have been "roommates" for more than thirty years.

I'll need front people, I realize, so that the customers who drive in from nearby towns don't notice that the "young" owner never seems to age.

Inside the office, I hit the ceiling-fan light, and begin sifting through the old newspapers and boxes looking for one that will do for the concession stand.

The headline of a yellowed copy of *The Spirit Sentinel* from June 13, 1959, catches my eye. It reads "City Mourns Daughter; New Girl Missing."

I lift it, studying the black and white picture—Sonia's dimple and laughing eyes. I trace the hairline around her lovely face. Sixteen forever.

I never want to be the kind of monster that destroys innocence like that.

Reaching into my small half-fridge, I grab a bottle of blood, pour a quarter of it into a Texas A&M mug, and pop that into the microwave on the shelf.

Seconds later, I close my eyes, savoring the taste, pushing back the disgust.

I've been this way for only a few weeks.

It's funny. I used to roll my eyes at all those media stories about the trouble kids get into on the Internet. How every generation of grown-ups assumes that whatever's new—from flapper dresses to rock-and-roll to the World Wide Web—is automatically a sign of the apocalypse. My theory was that parenthood triggered amnesia followed by paranoia, though I had to admit it would've been nice to have someone who cared.

Not long after Uncle Dean cracked one of my ribs, I heard at school that there was this guy in Athens, Georgia, selling a "power elixir" on the 'net. I figured it was some kind of steroid cocktail. Probably risky, but it's not like my life was all that safe to begin with. Anyway, the guy supposedly supplied a vat of the stuff to the Varsity football team in El Paso that took state last year.

It was so easy. I "borrowed" Uncle Dean's MasterCard and put in my order. The vial arrived overnight in a box packed with dry ice.

I remember thinking as I unscrewed the cap, *What the hell?*

Nothing could've been more appropriate.

Blinking back the memory, I reach for the bottle to pour myself more blood.

Someone has used a finger to write something in the condensation on the glass. It looks like the letter "S." It wasn't there a moment ago. She's getting bolder, making a bigger play for my attention. It's flattering, I admit. "Sonia?"

S

"What do you think?" Ginny asks, straightening the newly poured paper cups on the concession stand.

counter.

“Not bad.” I have to give her credit. In Ginny’s make-do theater uniform, complete with ponytail, she looks like the picture of all-American wholesomeness. She also had her mom swing by Wal-Mart (two towns north) and they picked up ice, several two-liter plastic bottles of coke (diet, regular, Diet Coke, Diet Pepsi, Sprite), and several discounted packages of candy bars. It’s quite the display of enthusiasm, *spirit*, you might say.

She grins and grabs a black marker to write out prices and instructions for paying on the honor system. Ginny brought the marker and poster board with her too. I set the box from my office on the counter before she got back. It’s already been wrapped in bright gold paper, another Wal-Mart purchase.

My gaze lands on the skin over her jugular. Luckily for Ginny, I’m able to buy fresh-shipped “provisions” from the same site that sold me the original dose.

The night I buried my uncle’s body behind the barn, I received an e-mail from the vendor, telling me I qualified for “special customer status” and giving me a code to log in for future purchases. What I found was a series of pages within the site that included a long question-and-answer document about our kind, information on how to mix various blood-wine blends, and from there, an online dating service (“Love That Lasts”) extended to all registered members at no additional fee. I admit clicking through it, despite everything amused by the ads for growing your fangs and shrinking your thighs and finding your “eternal consort.” I have *no* intention of going there.

I may be an easy mark, helping to finance some other fiend’s long-term retirement. But I got what I wanted. Now I can defend myself against anyone.

I just had no idea that the price would be so high.



Looking out the theater window onto Main Street, I’m pleased to see a line has already formed—handful of teenagers and a county deputy with his wife.

This week, I’m showing *Phantom of the Opera*. I’ve scheduled *The Haunting* with Vincent Price, *Ghostbusters*, and *Ghost* for the three weeks after that.

I’m taking advantage of the place’s spooky rep. I hope Sonia doesn’t mind. More and more whenever I fix a loose board or vacuum the carpet or add Crème Caramel potpourri to the ladies room, I can’t help wondering if Sonia approves. I can’t help feeling like I’m trying to impress her.

School has been out for a couple of weeks now. The newness of summer has already worn off. Football players and cheerleaders are in double practices, but they’re done by sundown and eager to blow off steam. I should be able to pack in the locals and folks from nearby towns, if only because there’s nothing better to do.

“Three minutes,” I announce, noticing that the line outside is longer now. Much of it is curiosity, I’m sure. But I can build on that.

“That long?” Ginny exclaims, propping up the sign. “The ice will melt.”

“The ice will be all right. You’re . . . you’re doing fine.”

I can stand the sunlight, though it seems to weaken me. Just like Ginny’s bright smile. She has

skips toward the ticket counter and then, with a “Whoa,” goes flailing. Without thinking, I pour on the supernatural speed in time to stop her fall.

Ginny steadies herself with a hand on my shoulder. “Where did *you* come from?”

During life, I didn’t have friends my age, not in-person friends anyway, just some people I’d chatted with on the Internet. It never occurred to me that I’d feel pulled toward someone now. I know better than to care. I ask anyway. “Are you okay?”

“I guess.” She straightens. “I could’ve sworn I tripped over something.”

We both glance down at the smooth red carpet.



Ginny’s doing a bang-up job at the register. She’s all “yes’m” and “yes sir” with the grown-ups, amicable with the teens, and a charming reassurance that, despite the “haunted” theater and its murderous history, the ghost-movie theme is tongue-in-cheek. We’re all just having fun here.

Meanwhile, I’m serving up another row of cokes. It’s great. With the honor pay system, I don’t really have to interact with the costumers.

At least not until the deputy shoves a couple of rolled-up dollars into the box and says, “Young M. Stryker, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” I keep my voice level. I’ve never been in trouble with the law. In fact, I’m known as decent enough—as someone who’s had a hard life, but who’s respectable, graduated with honors. “Welcome to the Old Love, deputy.”

“How’s your uncle doin’?” he asks, grabbing a coke and a box of Milk Duds and a package of red licorice. “Some boys at Hank’s Roadhouse were askin’ about him.”

I knew that, sooner or later, the questions would come. It hurts to be reminded that Uncle Dean had buddies, that there was a better side to him, one I only glimpsed on the rare holiday or when he scored a big buck.

I swallow the lump in my throat, make a show of glancing both ways, and meet the deputy’s eyes dead on. Lowering my voice, I amp my drawl to match his. “Between you and me?”

The answering nod is sharp.

“I’m thinkin’ he finally pissed off the wrong man. High-tailed it to Matamoros before the guy came after him. Didn’t even say goodbye.”

The deputy takes that in. “Good riddance,” he mutters as he starts to walk off. Then after handing the coke to his wife, he turns back toward me, and adds, “I’m glad to see you makin’ something out of yourself. Your mama was a fine woman.”

For a while, I pour more drinks and offer a “hey” or “howdy” now and then as customers make their selections and pay. But it’s not long before I notice the ruckus at the ticket counter.

“Ben, please,” Ginny says, her voice rising, “I’ve got customers.”

Ben Mueller was a year behind me in high school. His older brother plays football for Baylor, his mom teaches at the elementary school, and his dad owns a used car dealership on the highway. His granddaddy, Derek Mueller, died two years ago of a heart attack after serving as sheriff for four decades. Ben himself is popular, a solid all-around athlete, and church-going. I only know him by

reputation, but he smirks a lot and looks like one of those fungible blond guys on the CW.

“Problem, Ginny?” I ask, approaching.

Ben laughs, and the sound is angry, bitter. “Are you a freak too?”

Behind him, Tricia, the lady who owns the beauty shop, is whispering with her best friend, Marti. They’re the unofficial news hotline. If the Old Love becomes known as a place for “wild young hooligans,” it’s all over. I’ve got to deal with this fast and without making a bigger scene.

“Ben, please,” Ginny says again. “You have to pay or leave.”

“Fine,” Ben replies. “But just know that I’m—”

I grab his arm, and I can tell he’s surprised by the strength of my grip. I stare him in the eye, realizing I’m a couple of inches taller. According to the FAQ on my blood dealer’s site, some of us have the power to enthrall the traumatized or weak-willed. It’s worth a try. Keeping my voice steady, I say, “You’re going to take off now.”

“I’m going to take off now,” Ben repeats and pivots on his boot heel to stroll out the front door.

I’m surprised that it worked. Again, I don’t know Ben well, but I’d never tag him as weak, and for trauma, anyone could tell he’s led a charmed life.

“My hero!” Ginny exclaims, and there’s real appreciation in her voice. Then she beams at the two ladies next in line. “May I help y’all?”



After the last customer settles in, I get *Phantom of the Opera* running from up in the projector room. Then I hear Ginny call my name. She sounds shocked, terrified.

I half fly downstairs and burst through the swinging door into the ladies’ room where she’s pointing at *GET OUT*, written on the mirror in plum-colored lipstick.

It wasn’t there before we opened. I didn’t notice anyone walking into the room before the move started. From the look on her face, I’m pretty sure Ginny didn’t do it, but the color of the lettering matches her lips. She grabs the tube from the counter.

“It’s mine,” she confirms. “It was in my purse.”

I’d stashed the purse in my office for her when Ginny returned this evening.

It must have been Sonia. I didn’t know she could do that, move objects. In any case, it’s starting to look like she wants to keep the place to herself. I don’t understand. We’re still getting to know each other, but it was going so well.

“A dumb joke,” I say to reassure Ginny. “Let’s get it cleaned up.”

Ginny opens the small storage cabinet to grab a spray bottle of glass cleaner and a roll of paper towels. “What did you do to Ben?” she asks in a measured voice, and I realize how sloppy I’ve been.

If I want to stay above suspicion, I’m going to have to learn to deal with people—especially run-of-the-mill troublemakers—without using my powers. No more enthralling. For that matter, no more super speed.

I answer the question with a question. “What’s going on between you and Ben?”

Ginny begins spraying the glass. “Can I trust you?”

It’s a bigger question than she realizes. I’m not sure I know the answer. “You can talk to me,” I say

“Ask anyone. I’m no gossip.” That’s true enough.

She goes to peek out the bathroom door to ensure no one is listening. “Well—”

“Wait. Let’s go to my office. It has a lock on it. No one can just walk in.”

“But what about . . . ?” she gestures to the mirror.

I shrug. “We’ll say it was the ghost.”

“Ghost?” Ginny asks.

On our way, I fill her in on the history, characterizing the haunting as local folklore. From Ginny’s severe expression, I figure she either finds the idea of ghosts offensive or blasphemous or, at the moment, she’s invested in a more corporeal issue.

I let us in, take the desk chair, and wait, trying not to let my impatience show. We can’t stay in here long with the door closed. She’s still a minor after all.

There’s something about her, though, some strange connection between us. I’ve said more words to Ginny today than I probably have to anyone in the last year.

Ginny crosses her arms. “I don’t know the people of Spirit that well yet, nowhere nearly as well as they know each other. I didn’t know about Ben.”

I lean forward to clear newspapers off a crate for her to sit on. “What about him?”

She takes a seat. “I . . . We went to prom together. Ben got a motel room on the highway afterward. I thought it meant one thing. He thought it meant, um—”

“I understand,” I say. A lot of guys have expectations about prom. I can’t help wondering how badly Ben took “no” for an answer. The fact that he was still hassling Ginny tonight suggests it was an ugly scene.

“I had to crawl out the bathroom window,” she adds.

It could’ve been worse. “You want me to walk you home tonight?”

“Yes,” Ginny pauses, standing again. “No. I’m fine. It’s just . . . I never meant for things to turn out this way. I never thought going on one lousy date would—”

“Haunt you forever?” I ask.

She visibly shivers. “How did you know?”

My uncle’s face flits across my memory. “Call it a hunch.”



Once the last happy customer leaves, Ginny skips across the lobby with a large black trash bag. “Let’s get this over with and go celebrate!” With that, she flashes that sunshine grin and disappears into the screening room.

Celebrate? I’m going to have to sit her down and explain that we’re employee and employer, that we can’t ever be anything more. Except . . . she could use a friend right now. “Hang on,” I say. “Let me help you.”

I grab a bag, and then it dawns on me that I should probably hit the restrooms first. So, I head down the hall, my steps slowing when I hear the mysterious voice again. “Sonia?” Is that *her* singing? “Sonia!”

I let the plastic bag slip from my fingers onto the red carpet and begin walking faster in the

direction of the sound. It's louder, clearer with each step I take.

I've heard the song before. Spirit only gets three radio stations—one in Spanish, one that plays country western, and one that plays golden oldies. It's a 1950s hit, "To Know Him Is to Love Him." It's kind of sweet and kind of insipid and, once you've heard it, it's hard to get out of your head for the rest of the night.

The voice leads me to the door of a dingy break room that, in the push toward the grand re-opening, I decided to worry about later. I'm reaching for my keys when the supposedly locked door opens on its own.

Inside, the temperature is cooler, much cooler than it should be, especially with the vents shut. I'm greeted by the sight of a sink and cabinets, an empty space where a full-size refrigerator used to be, a beat-up table big enough for six, and five metal chairs.

The voice is coming from one of ten rusty half-lockers lined against a wall.

I'd hold my breath, but breathing is optional. "What are you trying to tell me?"

When I open the locker, it's empty. The voice grows louder, the room colder.

From behind, I hear something smack the table. Turning fast, I see the dust still flying up from where the little cloth-bound book landed. I walk over, and the song dissipates with each step I take, ending altogether when I pick up the . . . it's a diary.

I flip through the entries, each signed with the letter "S." I slip out an old photo of a lovely dark-haired girl, the same girl whose photo is on the front page of the 1959 copy of *The Spirit Sentinel* in my office. She's cuddling a tabby kitten.

Amazing. After a lifetime as a loner, I suddenly have two new girls in my life.

Ginny is easy enough to figure out. But Sonia? The singing, the diary, even the mysterious "S" here and there all seem a lot more welcoming than the *GET OUT* in the bathroom. Does she really want me to leave, or is she just playing along with the haunted-theater theme?

A moment later, from across the building, Ginny cries out again.

When I reach the screening room, she's clutching her right forearm. Blood is dripping through her fingers. I can smell it. I can almost taste it. I feel my fangs slide.

I pause to regain control, calling, "Ginny!" like I can't spot her toward the front, bent in the aisle.

"Over here," she says, straightening, her face covered by her honey-colored hair.

I jog to her side. "What happened? Did you cut yourself on a chair?" They're old, and the heavy cushioned seats fold down. She could've torn her skin on a spring.

"No." Ginny lifts her hand from her arm to show me three short, deep scratches. They look like fingernail marks. Sounding mystified, she adds, "It was like being clawed by the wind."

Sonia. I catch myself licking my lips. "You need stitches. Let's—"

"No," Ginny replies. "It's fine. I was just surprised."

"It'll scar," I insist.

"Give me your shirt," she counters.

"Wha—"

"Your shirt. So I can use it to, you know, apply direct pressure."

Embarrassed by the misunderstanding, I'm already unbuttoning by the time she's finished the sentence. I fold the material as best I can and tie it around her arm.

"My hero," Ginny says again. She rises on her toes to kiss my cheek and, losing her balance, her lips land, lingering, on my throat instead. "About that celebration. . . ."

“Go home, Ginny,” I say, moving away.

She looks stricken, like the child she is. “But. . . .”

I lighten my tone. “I mean, you’d best be getting home.”

I watch her walk up the aisle, fuming, and disappear out the door.

Then a disembodied voice—soft, musical, and furious—whispers in my ear, “Murderer, murderer, murderer.”



Later, at my uncle’s ranch, I walk to his unmarked grave behind the barn. I buried him deep, wrapped in a Mexican blanket. The ground is bare, packed hard. I try to tell myself it’s more fitting that he be here instead of at the old cemetery in town. Uncle Dean loved this land as much as he was capable of loving anything.

The grave unsettles me, though. No stone, no cross. He may not have been a good man, but he was my mom’s big brother.

As dawn approaches, I shake off the guilt and go inside.

Now, I’m surfing the Web at the dining-room table, drinking microwave-heated blood and researching ghosts. Sonia’s history does track with what I’ve learned so far. Her death was traumatic. Her murderer was never caught. In the spirit world, that’s textbook “unfinished business.” A reason to haunt. And it’s clear that Sonia wants me to know who she is—writing her initial and giving me the diary are clear enough hints.

According to the newspaper article, though, Sonia was a sweetheart. She used to teach Sunday school and run errands for her elderly neighbors. A quick skim of the diary—peppered with initials—confirms that she was a good-hearted girl with loopy handwriting and typical teen angst: home-worshiped a boy (“D”), a rival girl (“K”). She adored Elvis (“E”), had a kitten named Peso (“P”), and collected toys at Christmas for the poor.

Maybe Sonia thinks I’m a threat to Ginny, and she wants me to know she’s on to me. I’m not sure why she attacked Ginny, though. Maybe in her ghostly state, Sonia’s confused. Or maybe she’s trying to protect Ginny by scaring her off.

I guess there’s always the possibility that the Old Love is home to more than one ghost. Katherine, the girl who went missing, is probably K. According to the diary, she and Sonia didn’t get along in life. But there’s no hard evidence of more than one entity, and the singing voice that led me to Sonia’s diary in the break room matched the accusing one that whispered “murderer.”

Besides, how many dead people could possibly be hanging around the place?

In any case, I can’t overlook the lipstick message or the fact that Ginny was injured. If I can somehow convince Sonia (or whomever) that I’m not dangerous, I’ll need to force her out. Either that or my effort to resurrect the Old Love is over.

The question is, how? I’m in no position to be calling a minister or priest.

Worse, the ghost who spoke is right. I can be lethal. I have killed once before.

I take another swig of blood and notice that my caller ID is blinking. Ben Mueller. He didn’t leave a message.

Why would Ben call here? Does he seriously think Ginny came home with me last night? It's not like I've got any kind of rep with girls. Then again, he knows Ginny better than I do, and considering the way she kissed my neck. . . .

Still, calling after the way they fought earlier, that's stalker behavior. Maybe Sonia's right to focus on Ginny's safety, only she's worried about the wrong guy.



The following evening, patrolling the theater hallway, I don't hear any singing. I don't step into a corner spot. I don't see a fresh letter "S" written anywhere.

Today I was the one who fetched refreshments. I also made some calls, ordered a regular shipment of candy, popcorn, and coke. Tonight I have to put Sonia to rest.

Ginny comes bounding into the lobby at 7 P.M. sharp. She's wearing a different white shirt, with sleeves down and buttoned at the wrists.

"How's your arm?" I ask from the concession stand.

Ginny shrugs. "It looked worse than it was."

"And Ben?" I press. "Has he bothered you again?"

She glances at the front doors. "Not today."

It's then that I hear Sonia whisper "murderer" in my ear again.

"No!" I exclaim. At Ginny's expression, I add, "Not you." I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. "I'm sorry, but you're going to have to leave. We're not opening tonight. There's. . . . Someone's here. This is going to sound crazy, but she's a—"

"Ghost?" Ginny raises her scratched arm. "Yeah, I already figured out that much. And personally, I'd say we exorcise the bitch."

Wow. That was the last reaction I would've expected. I can't help admiring Ginny's bravery, even though I'm not sure about her. Maybe we could have a future after all, if we're willing to fight for it.

I glance at my mom's Bible, wrapped in a kitchen towel, on the concession counter. I don't know whether I'll burst into flames if I touch it. I don't know what I'm doing at all. Even though Sonia lashed out at Ginny, I can't help having mixed feelings about taking her on. After all, I'm no innocent, and by all accounts, she used to be.

"Seriously, let's do it now." Ginny takes a step in my direction, only to be violently shoved back by a whirlwind, a fierce wall of air, separating us.

Candy and cups fly off the counter, splattering coke. A bloody slash appears on Ginny's forehead. The crystal chandelier shakes and sways.

"Sonia!" I shout, trying to reach Ginny. "Sonia, please! Listen to me! You're making a mistake. Don't you see? You're hurting her!"

"Murderer!" returns Sonia's voice, this time louder than mine. "Murderer!"

"I—" Do I have to admit it? Is *that* what it'll take? "I'm. . . ."

Ginny is knocked onto her back. She struggles like she's being choked by invisible hands. She kicks with both legs. Then she's lifted, spun, and dropped again.

I reach back for the Bible, letting go as pain flashes across my fingertips.

I don't understand. Sonia knows that *I'm* the monster. Why target Ginny, not me?

For a split second, I wonder if Sonia is jealous, if the girls are fighting over me. But then Sonia wails "murderer, murderer!" again.

"You're right! Sonia, you're right!" I never intended to kill my uncle, even though sooner or later he probably would've killed me. I just wanted to become stronger, strong enough to protect myself. I didn't know that the blood lust would come with that strength. I hadn't gained control of it yet. "Sonia, stop! Please! Punish me!"

I'm resigned to face her judgment when Ben tears into the lobby from the service hallway. He has a battle-axe in one hand and—dear God—the decapitated heads of Ginny's parents, by the hair, in the other.

Ben tosses them onto the red carpet. "Howdy, Ginny!"

Has Sonia possessed him? Has he lost his mind?

Ginny is on her knees, her head bent, her hands covering her face.

She's an easy target.

"Murderer, murderer, murderer!" Sonia charges again.

Ben hesitates, his gaze searching for the speaker.

"Sonia!" I duck a box of Milk Duds that whizzes by. I want to help. I need to, but the supernatural wind is holding me back. "Let her go! He'll *kill* her!"

Ginny looks so small, huddled on the red carpet. We've known each other only a couple of days, but she's brought sunshine into my life and made me feel like I belong in the glow. It's not love. It's the hope of love. But it's the closest I've come to it since I was ten years old. If Ginny wants me, how can I be a monster?

I reach for the Bible again and hold it over my head, ignoring the pain. "In the name of. . . ." I raise my voice, start again. "In the name of the Father, the Son—"

With a roar, Ginny raises her face. Her mask of innocence melts away, and I see her for what she is: Undead. Demonic. Like me, a vampire.

I drop the Bible, clenching my blistered hands. "Ginny?"

Ben looks from her to me, like he's trying to figure out whose side I'm on.

"I was going to tell you," Ginny says, her voice pleading. "When your profile showed up on the system, I thought it was a sign." Her shoulder jerks, struck by the ghost. "I want the kind of love that lasts."

The system. "Love That Lasts." She's talking about the blood dealer's matchmaking service. Ginny must have the same supplier.

"Sonia!" she screams. "Don't you have anything better to do? You were a loser in life, and you're still a loser now. I told you this town would be mine someday!"

"Murderer!" Sonia replies. "Katie, murderer!"

So, Ginny was the one who killed Sonia. Sonia was never trying to scare her off, to protect her from me. When Sonia said "murderer," I wasn't the one she was talking about. Ginny had been Katie Katherine, the girl whose body was never found.

From her crouched position, Ginny lunges at Ben as a swath of blood appears across her torso, staining the white shirt. She knocks the axe from his hand and kicks his boots out from under him. He's no match for her.

Ginny can't fight Sonia, but she could tear Ben apart.

“Let me help him,” I say, and the ghostly force dies as quickly as it rose. I vault over the concession stand, snatch the axe from the carpet, and stand between them.

For a moment, I see the hope in Ginny’s eyes. Unlike Ben, she knows that I’m one of her kind. She’s already admitted that she wants me. She’s already called me her “hero” twice. I slowly shake my head, leaving no doubt about my intentions.

“You wouldn’t,” Ginny breathes as reality sinks in. She’s been beaten by me, Sonia, and Ben together. Her voice is resigned. Her last words are: “Daddy had such big plans.”

I sever her head with the blade and, shaking, drop the axe handle.

After a stunned moment, Ben climbs to his feet and puts a hand on my shoulder. “You okay, man?”

“Better now,” I say. “You?”

“She came after me on prom night,” he explains. “I’ve been trying to run her out of our town ever since.”

Our town. Ben is Spirit. I’m Spirit. God knows Sonia is Spirit.

Ginny was the new girl again, this time with a new name.

“I tried to warn her off,” Ben adds. “I tried to scare her off. I went to my family for help, but nobody believed me. She didn’t seem like a vampire, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

What happened here will stay with Ben for a long time. He isn’t the kind of person who can destroy someone else, even something else, without it weighing on him. I know how he feels and then some.



It’s been two weeks since that night, since the last time I noticed any sign of Sonia. I already miss her. I’m sorry for having doubted her goodness, and I’m glad that the monster who killed her will never hurt anyone again.

Ben and I burned Ginny’s and her parents’ bodies (heads too) behind my barn. We buried the axe which he’d taken from the mayor’s office, near my uncle.

“Come spring, you might sprinkle some wildflower seed on the graves,” he said. “I mean, they were human beings once.”

I said I would and made a mental note to sprinkle seeds on Uncle Dean’s grave too.

The next day Ben fibbed to his aunt Betty that the Augustines had packed up and left in the middle of the night for some six-figure job that the mayor landed up north. Ben explained that Ginny told him her dad was too embarrassed to own up to running out on the town after all his big promises. He claimed that’s what their spat in the ticket line had been about.

Betty repeated the story the next day at the beauty shop, and it’s become common knowledge since. The deputy is circulating a petition to put his own name on a mayoral ballot. I signed it last week.

Turns out, Ben’s not a bad guy. His granddad, Sheriff Derek Mueller, had been the vampire hunter who originally chased the Augustines out of town back in the day. The sheriff had passed on what he’d seen, what he’d learned, to Ben so Ben would know what to do if the homicidal undead ever swarmed back through town.

Ben has decided to work at the Old Love and save up for college. Apparently, being a good athlete

by Spirit standards isn't necessarily the same as being scholarship material. Facing down the underdog has grown him up a lot.

He doesn't know what I am, not yet, but he took it well when I explained about Sonia. I hope that when the day comes, when he realizes I'm not just another home-town boy, he thinks back on what happened and gives me the benefit of the doubt.

Tonight after the Ghostbusters save New York City, I thank Ben for a good night's work, lock the front door behind him, and once again hear Sonia singing "To Know Him Is to Love Him."

When I look toward the voice, I see Sonia herself for the first time. She's taken over one of my jobs, wiping down the concession counter, like it's no big deal.

Sonia is a see-through figure in a uniform not much different than the one Ginny wore, except that Sonia's includes a red vest with a gold patch that reads "Love Theater."

I didn't realize she was still here. I don't get it. With Ginny gone for good, why stick around? "Sonia?"

She raises her face, and I see the dimple, the laughing eyes. "Cody!"

"Sonia," I say in case she didn't understand what happened, "your murderer has been destroyed. It's over. You can move on now. You can, uh, go into the light."

Sonia tilts her head. "It wasn't all about justice." Her voice has a hollow quality to it. "Tell me, Cody. Do you believe in love at first sight?"

Staring at her, God help me, I just might. I read on the Web that the more you believe in a ghost, the stronger your feelings for them, the more substantial they become.

With each passing second, Sonia appears more solid, more alive. And I have to admit, in some ways, we would be perfect for each other. We're both tied to this old theater, we'll both be teenagers forever, and we're both dead. Even better, I don't have to worry about physically hurting her. No flesh. No blood. No problem.

This could become more than the hope of love. It could become the real thing. But there's something she has to be told first. She may not know what happened at my uncle's ranch, but I thought she'd figured out what I am from the bottle of blood in the office mini-fridge. I guess Sonia didn't realize what the liquid was or maybe in her ghostly state, some details are fuzzy.

"Sonia," I begin again as she floats toward me. "There's something you should know. I'm not a monster, the same kind of monster—"

Her cool fingertips press against my lips, and in her gaze, I see complete understanding, total acceptance. "No," Sonia says. "You're not."

Amber Smoke

KRISTIN CAST

From their place in the bowels of the Underworld, the Furies, Daughters of Night, summon their son. They are skeletal winged creatures, the black of rotting flesh thinly stretched across their hunched, quivering bodies, not much more than flesh sacks barely able to contain the power of each of their morbid talents.

“Alekossss, come.”

He was birthed eons ago from the womb of vengeance, conceived by jealousy, and grown in constant anger. Bred to defend mortals, he was sent from their underground realm to the world above and there, away from their poison, he learned compassion. At first only so that he could mimic and blend. Later, after centuries, humanity took hold within him, causing the Furies unending confusion with their errant son, this man who grew up and away from them.

Alekos appears, his Herculean body glowing from the descent, the return home. “Yes, mothers?” He steps down from the ledge he was summoned to, his torn jeans dragging through the souls of the doomed as he strolls toward the three creatures in the dark. He can hear their wings rustling with the excitement of his return. Although he had been there only weeks before, they had not seen him in years. Time ticks by slowly below. As he approaches, they gently grab him and lead him farther into the nothing, farther from the whines of the tortured.

“Ssssit.” They command. He sits and puts his feet nonchalantly up on the table.

“The longer you’re up there, the more disgusting and human you become.” Their throats click and rattle as they speak as one.

He removes his feet and snaps his fingers. Oil lamps flicker on, revealing a cave wet and putrid with chaos and death. The three figures huddle together staring at their son across a crude stone table on which sits a bouquet of night-blooming moon flowers the delicate color of infants’ flesh. Slowly they begin to rock back and forth as if they are one and not three. Their eyes are dark and endless, and dark with the blood of the tortured. The snakes in their hair alternate between attacking and caressing one another.

“The Fates have decided. Her cord isss being cut tonight.” At first they speak as one, then break apart, finishing each other’s thoughts.

“You mussst find her,”

“give her life,”

“sssssive her,”

“sso ssshe can”

“give usss”

“vengeance.”

The Furies click with amusement as his mind is flooded with pictures of a beautiful young woman with long chestnut hair, chocolate eyes, olive skin, and a black dress. They have chosen her for him. He blinks and stands. Alekos knows he was only there for this—the gift of his mission. It is now time for him to depart, and for the first time in centuries he feels nervous, excited, alive.

“Thank you, mothers.” He turns to leave. “Oh! Furies, mothers.” He glances back to see them still swaying. “Where do I find her?”

They close the black holes that served as their eyes, grip each other tightly, and send their beautiful son to the modern world with the sounds of their shrieks echoing their farewells.



Stop and stare. You start to wonder why you're here not there.

Ryan Tedder's melodic voice came booming out of my black cell phone, waking me from a much needed nap. I groped around my nightstand unsuccessfully for my glasses. Seriously blind as a bat, I quickly gave up on reading the glowing caller ID box. Instead I flipped open the phone.

“Hello?”

“Oh my God, Jenna. Were you sleeping?” The annoyed tone picked me up out of the dream world I was loitering in and threw me back into reality.

“Bridget? No! Sleeping, me? No!” I perkily pretended.

“Good! Well, I was just calling to remind you to bring your camera tonight. We're going to have so much fun at Taylor's hotel party! I can't wait! Being seniors is sooo much fun! What are you wearing?”

“Umm, I think my little black strapless dress with my mom's new gold shoes.”

Bridget sucked in air. “No way! Those new strappy heels from Saks? That is so not fair! We're going to look super hott, like always. Ugh, hang on, my mom is yelling at me.” She moved the mouthpiece of her cell away and I could hear her muffled whines at her mom. “*Okay, Mom.* She wants me to tell you not to forget your cell phone because that gross serial killer guy just killed someone else. Well duh, he's a *serial* killer, jeez. Sorry, she is so protective and weird. But anyway, I have to go finish getting gorgeous. See you at the Ambassador at ten! Love you, and don't forget the digital!”

The line went dead. *How is she always so happy?*

I stood up, stretched, found my glasses laying on the floor next to my nightstand, and looked at the clock: 7:57 P.M. *Crap. No time for a shower.*

As I sleepily wandered the five feet from my bed to my ocean-themed bathroom, I could hear my mom screeching at me from her room down the hall. “Jenna! Do you know where my gold strappy shoes are? I just bought them and they've already *mysteriously* disappeared.” She walked into my room and looked around.

I poked my head out of the bathroom door, my hair falling straight into the toothpaste I had just squeezed onto the brush. “Mom! If you're going to come in here anyway, *why* do you have to yell at me from down the hall?”

“Saves time. Which I don't have much of. Paul's going to be here,” she looked down at her watch. “in less than an hour. So?”

“Oh, umm, nope. Haven’t seen ’em. Sorry.” I hardly ever lie to my mom, she’s too good at catching me, but this was different. It was the first party of my senior year of high school, and I had to look the best. And I’m sure Paul had seen them already. She’s been with the nerdy mortician for like six months. Besides, gold is hot right now, ask anyone.

“Hmm, well, if you see them let me know.” She wasn’t looking at me; instead, she continued to take an inventory of my room.

“Yeah. Okay.” I sighed trying to keep the annoyed *I’m running late too* tone out of my voice. I stuck the toothbrush into my mouth.

She started to leave, and her dark curls bounced around her shoulders, making her suddenly look a lot younger than a forty-something-year-old mom. She paused at the door. “And Jenn, don’t forget to take Mr. Pepper. He’s in his spot by the front door.”

Oh Lord, Mr. Pepper. Ugh. I want to actually be popular this year, not be known as “the girl who carries around pepper spray.”

I finished brushing my teeth, put my contacts in, and stood staring in the mirror at my messed-up locks. “Up-do!” I decided.

I began wrapping my fingers around my tangled hair in an attempt to turn it into an intentional messy low pony when the cute Ryan Tedder again blared through the room. I quickly clipped up my hair and glanced down at the sink where I had set my phone. “Connor!” The picture of his goofy smile, sandy shaggy hair, and gray eyes made my stomach jump.

“Hey.” I answered casually, pretending not to be excited.

“Hey. I thought you’d never answer. What are you doin’?”

“Nothin’.” I rolled my eyes. *Nothin’? I am so lame.*

“Oh, well, that’s cool. I just wanted to see if you’re coming to Taylor’s thing tonight. There’s gonna be a DJ, and his older brother’s bringing vodka and beer and stuff, so it should be pretty awesome.”

Of course I’m going. It’s only like the biggest social event of the semester! “Umm, yeah. I think Bridget and I’ll probably make an appearance.”

“Good. I’ll definitely look for you then.”

“Definitely. See ya tonight.” I hung up before I could start rambling about my undying love for him. *Oh my God he’s so f-ing hot!*

I fought off the urge to call Bridget and babble semi-hysterically about Connor actually calling me and instead trotted to my closet on a wave of happy he’s-almost-my-boyfriend thoughts, where my black Tinkerbell cocktail dress hung waiting. Then I began digging my mom’s cute gold shoes out, hiding from under my dirty clothes.

Sadly, Mom chose that instant to prove her radar wasn’t fading with age. Thankfully, she knocked on my open door, giving me a split-second of warning.

I jumped. “Mother!” I tried to plaster on an innocent smile as I jerked around to look at her.

“I’m not yelling this time. Ew.” She looked at the wad of clothes I’d grabbed to camouflage her shoes. “Don’t tell me you’re wearing something dirty to your little get-together thing tonight.”

“No, Mom, I’m just looking for my, uh, headband. You almost made me pee on myself.”

“Sorry. Anyway, Paul’s here so I’m heading out on my *date*. Maybe I’ll even have a little sex. Hehe.” She made herself giggle and turn red as she left me with that disgusting mental picture.

Oh barf! Is everyone having sex except me? I stood up and thought about Connor. *Wait! It’s been an hour already?!* I whipped around to face the clock: 9:03. *Shit.* I frantically dressed myself, found the

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