

The Devil's Whorehouse by C. Flemish

The headlights of Dean's old Camaro sliced through the darkness like razor blades. Inside the car, each drag from his cigarette lit the cabin in a deep, flickering orange. His arm rested out the window, fingers tapping rhythmically on the steering wheel. It had been hours since he'd seen another car.

Two weeks ago, his friend Alex had called with unexpected news—he was moving back to Los Angeles. Dean and Alex had been inseparable since high school, but when Alex's family relocated to Seattle, their friendship grew complicated and sporadic. Hearing his voice again felt like a gift.

"That's great, man. I can't believe it."

"Believe it," Alex said. "I got a job with a small consulting company in Downtown. Already started looking for a place."

"Looking for a place? No way—just crash at my place until you're settled. When are you moving?"

"I've got everything boxed. Getting a truck in two weeks, then heading down."

Dean paused, thinking. "Okay, this might sound crazy, but I want to come help you. I haven't been up to Seattle in forever, and I've got vacation days I need to use anyway."

"Dean, come on. You don't need to do that. I've got it under control."

"Yes I do: that's what friends are for, they're there for each other in their time of need. Work is eating me alive—reports, meetings, deadlines. Three years ago, I was partying every night. Now it's all emails and dress shoes. I'm losing my mind. Trust me, I need a road trip more than you need the help."

There was a pause on the line.

"Alright," Alex said. "If you're serious, I'd love to have you here. We'll catch up. Hit the town."

"I missed you, bro." Dean said. "In a strictly non-sexual way, of course."

"Obviously."

The next day, Dean requested his vacation and, two days later, he hit the road. He drove onto the Pacific Coast Highway just north of Malibu, cruising all along the coast, and made a brief one-night stop in Santa Barbara, only to leave early in the morning so he could spend some time at the Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park.

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The McWay Waterfall tumbled eighty feet down onto a sun-drenched beach, spilling into the shimmering teal Pacific. He had been here many times, sometimes crashing in his dad's old truck bed, waking at dawn to watch the sky turn from ink black to molten pink and red. It was the only place that ever truly quieted his mind.

Once, as he was locking his camera onto a tripod, he heard people yelling—"Condor! Condor!" He turned in time to see a massive California Condor soaring above the falls, wings stretched wide, gliding straight toward him. He fumbled with his gear, frantically swapping lenses, but by the time he was ready, it was gone. Just like that. The shot of a lifetime, missed by seconds. He'd returned many times hoping to see it again, but Lady Luck had moved on.

After an hour of wandering the cliffs and soaking in the salt air, he climbed back into the Camaro and continued north. Traffic thickened along the two-lane highway. The redwoods closed in, towering like silent sentinels as the light thinned to a dull gray. Five hours later, he passed through San Francisco and began climbing into the shadowy arms of the Shasta National Forest.

It was barely dusk when he entered the godforsaken stretch of the upper highway. The redwoods grew denser, more tangled, forming a wall that choked out the last traces of sunlight. The world seemed to tighten around the Camaro. The trees blurred together in the fading light—repeating shapes, like a looping dream.

Dean cranked the volume. The Misfits screamed through the speakers, the song "Devil's Whorehouse" thumping in time with his heart. He tapped along with the bassline, trying to ignore the growing knot in his stomach.

He glanced to his left—and froze.

For just a second, he saw a small boy standing by the trees. Six or seven years old, maybe. Dressed in an old-fashioned blue Sunday suit. Under one arm he held a red and white striped ball. Beside him, towering over the boy, stood a ten-foot-tall figure. Not human. Something *else*. Hulking. Crooked. Its hand—or what resembled one—gripped the boy's shoulder.

Dean jerked the wheel, tires screeching as he swerved across the lane. "What the fuck?" he shouted, heart pounding. He shot a glance into the rearview mirror.

Nothing.

The taillights splashed red across the tree trunks like blood. The road was empty.

He fumbled for the ashtray and stubbed his cigarette out with shaking fingers. "I need to stop smoking this shit," he muttered, slamming it shut.

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The headlights flickered.

"What the hell..." he whispered.

The car lurched beneath him—bucking, kicking like a spooked animal. The gas gauge read over half full. Still, it groaned as if it were starving.

Dean tightened his grip on the wheel. The radio let out a garbled hiss, and the song distorted into static before snapping back in.

He didn't know what he had just seen, but he knew something had changed. The forest felt *alive* now—watching. Waiting.

"What the fuck? Come on, you gotta be kidding me!" Dean slammed his hands against the steering wheel as the Camaro coasted to a dead stop, rolling onto the gravel shoulder. He threw the door open and jumped out, the door creaking in protest. His foot met the car's side with a loud *thud*.

"Piece of shit! *Come on!* No. No. Not here, not now!"

He kicked it again—this time harder—leaving the dirty imprint of his Converse on the metal.

"Come on, please," he muttered, desperation creeping in. "Not here."

He popped the hood and grabbed a flashlight from the glovebox, clicking it on with trembling fingers. The beam swept across the engine bay—battery, hoses, plugs. Everything looked fine. Too fine.

"Fuck!" he growled, kicking the front tire.

He yanked his jacket from the back seat and pulled out his phone.

No bars.

"Of course. What was I thinking? Great. Just fucking great."

He stared into the thick dark lining both sides of the road. There was no point turning back—he hadn't seen another car or building for hours. Nothing but endless blacktop and trees. He took a breath, stuffed his phone in his jacket, and started walking north.

There's nothing behind me. If I keep going, I'll run into something... anything.

The first fifteen minutes passed quickly, carried by the momentum of his anger. He muttered curses under his breath, swearing at the car, at the road, at his luck. But after half an hour, the energy drained. The silence pressed in around him. Each step felt heavier, and his mind kept churning through reasons why the Camaro died—none of them satisfying.

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And then the quiet changed.

He didn't hear anything. But he *felt* it.

Watched.

He picked up his pace. The wind rustled the treetops far above, but the road stayed still, deathly quiet. Every now and then, he stopped abruptly, spinning on his heel, trying to catch something moving just beyond the reach of his flashlight.

Nothing.

His skin prickled. The hair on the back of his neck stood like pins.

Stop it. You're being paranoid.

Just as he was about to break into a sprint, a soft glow appeared ahead—neon, flickering through the trees. Without thinking, Dean ran.

The pavement beneath his shoes felt hot—strangely hot. His heels burned as if he'd been running barefoot on sun-scorched asphalt. His chest screamed, lungs tightening, vision tunneling. The pain in his sides was sharp, stabbing. Still, he pushed forward.

He stumbled into a gravel parking lot and bent forward, hands on knees, sucking air.

A building stood before him.

It looked like a restaurant—sort of. The structure was swallowed by creeping vines and gnarled shrubs. Its wood was dark and cracked, as if it had been there for a hundred years, forgotten. The red neon sign buzzed and sputtered overhead, barely holding together. It read:

CRYING WOLF

Dean wiped sweat from his forehead. "What a name."

He took a tentative step forward.

The parking lot was full—maybe a dozen cars, all of them aged and forgotten-looking. Dust-caked windshields. Some had a flat tire, others had a thin layer of moss clinging to the fenders. Dean hadn't passed a single car in hours, but here they were, parked in tight rows like they'd been there a long, long time.

He passed a rusted El Camino with a cracked rear window and paused.

Something sat on the hood. A small, filthy child's shoe—faded red canvas, worn through at the sole. It looked like it had been out here for years. Dean didn't touch it. He just kept moving.

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Without warning, something slammed against a window—hard. Dean flinched, stumbling back.

A massive, wolf-like dog snapped and barked inside the cab of a rusted-out '50s Ford pickup. Its muzzle smeared the glass with foam as it clawed at the window, eyes wide with frenzy.

Dean instinctively raised a hand like a pistol and pretended to shoot. "They should put you down, crazy dog."

The animal kept thrashing as he walked past, but its barks were muffled behind the glass.

As he reached the door, the muffled tones of a piano spilled out into the night.

It stopped him in his tracks.

His mom had tried for years to teach him piano, but Dean was never the patient type. He couldn't sit still long enough to get good. But somewhere along the line, the lessons stuck in a different way—he'd developed a love for the music. The classics, especially. He could listen for hours. Chopin. Debussy. Beethoven.

Hearing it now, here, in the middle of nowhere, unsettled him more than the dog had.

He grabbed the shabby door handle and slowly entered. He could clearly hear the pianist playing Johan Sebastian Bach's Air. He loved that song. He couldn't explain why, but he just did. It made him feel light-headed and forget about all the bullshit he had to endure on a daily basis. It made him feel as if nothing else mattered and, for that short moment in time, he could let everything go and it would be fine. His body would relax and he would feel intensely happy. He jokingly called it his 'musical orgasm'.

The lobby was deserted.

Where are all the people? The parking lot is packed; there should be a ton of people here!

Old copper candelabras faintly illuminated the deserted hallways.

"Hello? Anyone here? Hello? Customers?"

The floorboards squeaked underneath his black Converse trainers. He walked down the lobby looking for anyone that could help him. The place was covered in taxidermy and old knickknacks. Quail, pheasants, ducks, all plastered against the walls as if they were mid flight. Deer, coyotes and a kodiak bear completed the decor. Their empty black eyes seemed to stare him down, asking what in God's name he was doing here. There wasn't an inch of the wall that wasn't covered in stuff.

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Dean let the music guide him through the hallways, finally coming to a stop at a large wooden double door. The door was delicately decorated; scenes of miniature people running through orchards were carved into the wooden panels, reminding him of the old Dongyang wood carvings he had seen at the LACMA museum a few years ago. A pale light seeped out from beneath it. Gently, he pushed the door open, careful not to make it squeak. He could feel his heart beating in his chest. His palms were sweating slightly. The door barely opened enough for him to peek in. His hand clasped the handle tight as he tried to peek in.

The warm tunes of Bach now reached his ears directly, soothing him, filling him with warmth. Carefully, he twisted on his heels, stretching his neck, trying to see every possible angle without further opening the door. Alongside the room, booths were carved out of the wooden walls, red velvet curtains prudently draped in front of them. ThHe grabbed the shabby door handle and slowly stepped inside.

A rush of warm air greeted him, and with it came the sound of a piano playing Johann Sebastian Bach's "Air." He immediately recognized it—and smiled. He loved that song. He couldn't explain why, but it always did something to him. Made him feel light-headed, like floating just above the bullshit of life. It was a reset button. For a few minutes, nothing mattered. He could let go, just *be*. He jokingly called it his *musical orgasm*.

The lobby was deserted.

Where are all the people? The parking lot's packed. There should be a ton of people here.

Old copper candelabras flickered along the hallways, casting ghostly shadows across the walls. The soft flames barely lit the space—just enough to show that time had not been kind to this place.

"Hello?" Dean called. "Anyone here? Hello? Customers?"

The floorboards groaned under his black Converse as he walked deeper into the lobby. He turned slowly in place, scanning the room.

It was covered in taxidermy and strange knickknacks. Birds mid-flight—quail, pheasants, ducks—were frozen in dramatic poses along the walls. Deer heads peered out from the shadows. A snarling coyote crouched in one corner. A massive Kodiak bear loomed over the end of the hallway, paws raised, glassy eyes locked on him.

Their empty black eyes seemed to follow him as he moved, like they were waiting for something. Judging.

There wasn't a spare inch of wall that wasn't claimed by something dead.

What is this place? A hunting lodge? A forgotten museum?

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He let the music guide him. It grew louder, richer, as he approached a large wooden double door at the end of the hall. The wood was beautifully carved—miniature people running through orchards, tiny birds hiding in branches. It reminded him of the Dongyang woodwork exhibits he'd seen at LACMA a few years back.

A pale golden light spilled from underneath the door.

He reached out and gently pushed it open, careful not to make it squeak. His heartbeat thudded in his chest. His palm was damp against the metal handle.

The door barely opened. Just enough for him to peek in.

He clung to the edge of the frame, stretching his neck for a better view.

The warm sound of Bach now flowed over him directly—pure, unfiltered. It filled him with a kind of peace he hadn't felt in years.

Inside, the space felt like something out of another time.

Booths were carved directly into the wooden walls, each one veiled by rich red velvet curtains, partially pulled back. The architecture reminded him of an old Italian opera house, the kind he'd only seen in movies or on museum tours. Elegant. Romantic.

And *full*.

Each booth was occupied. People sat closely together, laughing, talking, leaning in as they shared jokes. Everyone had wine—deep red wine in large pitchers. Candles flickered gently on every table, casting a warm, intimate glow across the faces inside.

The thing that struck Dean most was how happy they all looked. Not just tipsy or relaxed. But *blissful*. Like none of them had a single care left in the world.

This place is sweet, he thought, momentarily forgetting where he was or how he'd arrived.

Still, something tugged at the edge of his mind—a strange stillness beneath all the laughter. Like a play he'd walked into midway, where everyone knew their lines but him.

As his eyes continued to scan the room, Dean finally spotted the source of the music.

At the center of the room, seated alone on a low stage, a woman played the piano.

She was the most beautiful woman Dean had ever seen.

Her fingers floated over the ivory keys like leaves caught in a summer breeze. Her feet moved with grace over the pedals, each motion a soft, intimate rhythm—an erotic waltz of ankles and arches. She didn't just play the piano. She *became* it.

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Everything about her glowed. Radiant. Otherworldly.

Her eyes shimmered like polished amethyst—not just purple, but *lit from within*, like they held some ancient, violet flame. Her long blonde hair flowed like it had a pulse of its own, swaying with her shoulders, cascading over her body with every subtle shift. Her skin was smooth, fair, delicate as porcelain, yet warm and alive. She looked close to his age—but something about her seemed ageless.

She was naked.

Dean blinked. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed before.

This is some kinky shit.

She was the center of the room's gravity—drawing every ounce of attention without anyone seeming to look directly at her. Yet everyone was tuned in, their laughter and chatter pulsing in perfect rhythm with her melody.

He couldn't stop himself. His eyes traced her—slowly—downward, over the arch of her back, past her gently swaying hips.

"Perfect," he whispered, not realizing the word had left his lips. A thin strand of drool slipped down his chin. He wiped it away quickly, a blush of shame flooding his face.

What the hell am I doing? She could be someone's girlfriend. Someone's wife.

His conscience tried to push its way in, but his desire had already taken hold.

His gaze followed the subtle movement of her muscles, tightening and relaxing with each motion. The effortless control she had over her body... it was hypnotic.

He was in a trance.

And so, it seemed, was everyone else.

His eyes moved to her breasts, round and firm, her nipples prominent and inviting. He felt himself harden, his pants tightening uncomfortably as a flush of heat surged through his gut.

Stop it, he told himself. Get a grip.

But another part of him whispered: *She's not real. She can't be real.*

Her lips—full, plump, impossibly soft—seemed made for desire. She was the kind of woman who could make a man forget everything he knew about himself.

To be kissed by those lips... to feel her melt into me...

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And then—she turned.

Their eyes met.

It was like a bolt of lightning ripped through his chest. He staggered back a step, breath caught in his throat.

Her lips moved—just slightly. Her eyes locked on his.

He didn't *hear* her voice. He *felt* it. Inside his skull. In his ribs. In the base of his spine.

Leave.

Her music never faltered, but her lips moved again. A whisper, a warning.

"Leave now."

Dean's stomach dropped. His throat tightened.

Leave? Why? What did I do? I need help.

The music swelled—louder, fuller, *darker*. And with it, her voice pressed deeper into his mind, as if the piano itself had started to speak.

Leave. They'll kill you.

Her sweet voice was soaked in dread.

And just as the meaning began to take shape, something ice cold clamped down on his shoulder.

He spun around like a shot.

Behind him stood a man.

Thin. Frail. Almost skeletal.

His cheeks were sunken, tight over sharp bones. Yellowed eyes, streaked with veins, seemed to glow in the candlelight. His hand—long, bony, corpse-like—hung in the air, a single finger pointing directly at Dean's chest.

"Can I help you, young man?"

"Oh. Oh, um, I'm sorry. My car broke down a few miles from here, and this was the first place I came across. I was hoping to ask for help. Could I use your phone, please?"

"I am truly sorry, sir," the man rasped, his voice a coarse whisper that seemed to rattle Dean's bones, "but we have no telephone on the premises. We are hours from anything. The telephone

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companies have deemed our establishment unworthy of infrastructure investment. And cellular phones do not function in these woods either."

Dean blinked. "Seriously?"

"In a way, it has proven to be a blessing," the man continued. "We do like it calm and quiet out here."

No shit, Dean thought.

"Taxis will not travel to our location, no matter the compensation offered. We are out here by ourselves—but that is precisely what our customers value. A place where they can truly be themselves."

"I see," Dean replied, forcing a polite tone. "Maybe I could catch a ride north with someone? I need to get my car towed."

He didn't even know why he bothered asking.

The man's yellow, beady eyes studied him. "I am certain someone would be delighted to have a young man such as yourself as their guest. If you do not mind attending tonight's gala, it is very possible you could receive a ride to your destination afterward."

"Really?" Dean said, genuinely surprised.

"We have some very charitable patrons here, sir. But first, we must clean you up." His gaze dropped to Dean's ripped jeans and mud-caked Converse. "If you would be so kind as to follow me to our changing room. We are a shirt-and-tie establishment, you understand. I am sure you will find something to fit our modest dress code. During your change, I will inquire with some of our guests to see who might enjoy your company for the evening's festivities."

The man turned and began to ascend the stairs. Dean followed.

As they climbed, he felt hundreds of glassy eyes watching him. Wild goats, deer, coyotes, springbok—head mounts lined the walls in chaotic abundance. It was like walking through a corridor of silent judgment.

It was beginning to freak Dean out.

What is this place?

At the top, a large wooden door creaked open, protesting loudly as if disturbed from slumber. The man gestured toward a series of closets at the far end of the room.

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"Shirts are in the boudoir to your right. Pants and shoes, you'll find on the left. I apologize in advance—we only have black ties. They are in the drawers below. I hope you will find something to your liking."

He turned to leave. Dean hesitated, then held out a hand.

"I'm Dean."

The man smiled—a crooked, unsettling stretch of cracked teeth, yellowed and smoky with age. He took Dean's hand and shook it.

As their hands met, a jolt of bitter cold shot up Dean's arm, slicing through his tendons and up to the back of his neck.

It nearly gave him brain freeze. His hand went numb to the wrist.

"Varney," the man said with a thin-lipped grin. "Varney Stigori. Lovely to make your acquaintance, young master Dean."

"Strigori?" Dean asked, blinking. "Are you Italian?"

"No, sir. I am Romanian," Varney said, his voice curling around the words like smoke. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have matters that require attending."

Before Dean could ask another question, Varney had slipped away, the door swinging shut behind him with barely a sound.

This is one fucked-up night. No one's ever going to believe this.

Dean kicked off his Converse without bothering to untie them and stepped toward the right-hand closet. It was packed with white shirts and formal jackets.

"Who wears this shit?" he muttered, pushing aside rows of crisp, old-fashioned tunics. Eventually, he found a normal white button-up and a skinny black tie.

He stripped off his Motorhead T-shirt and unzipped his jeans, hanging them neatly over a nearby chair. The pants closet didn't offer much better—lots of odd sizes and old fabrics—but eventually, he settled on a pair of plain black slacks that didn't scream "waiter at a funeral."

As he tried to squeeze into the pants, something poked his thigh. Reaching into the pocket, he pulled out a small, stiff rectangle.

A movie ticket.

"Night of the Living Dead – November 11, 1968."

"Shit. These are some old-ass pants."

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Still, he chuckled.

At least this guy had taste.

He struck a pose and quoted the film. "They're coming to get you, Barbara."

He laughed to himself.

That was a good movie.

As the laughter faded, the piano music returned, clear and seductive. His thoughts immediately went to the woman on stage—the way she moved, the softness of her skin, the curve of her—

He felt himself start to harden again. The tight pants made it anything but pleasant.

How much would it cost to get a girl like that to come play piano for a night?

His cock throbbed against the waistband.

"Stop it, for Pete's sake," he muttered.

He looked at himself in the mirror. He had to admit—he looked sharp.

I need to get a suit, he smirked, opening the door.

Varney was waiting.

"Ah, right on time," the old man said, delighted. Dean jumped—he hadn't expected him there.

"This way, young man. You've made quite the transformation, if you don't mind me saying so. I have found a wonderful couple who would be thrilled to host you tonight."

"Cool, that's really great. Thank you." Dean followed Varney to the gala room. The petrified petting zoo glared down at him as he descended the stairs, their lifeless eyes judging his every step.

They entered from the opposite side of the room, granting Dean a perfect view of the girl at the piano. Her beauty hit him like a drug. His knees nearly buckled.

Her skin glowed in the dim light like moonlit snow. Ethereal. Untouchable.

Dean followed the brittle man through the crowd, awestruck by the sheer scale and detail of the hall. It was a cathedral of decadence, the perfect stage for the woman who played like she was born to fill it. It looked as if the entire room had been carved from a single, ancient oak tree. Fifty booths lined the curved walls, each sculpted into its own rotunda. Gothic arches stretched upward and met at a central point in the ceiling like the bones of a vast, inverted ribcage.

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Copper-inlaid runes snaked along the walls, glinting orange in the candlelight. The flickering flames gave the illusion of movement—like fire trying to take root in the wood.

The air was warm and thick with the scent of apples—freshly picked, earthy, and sweet. Dean breathed it in and felt a strange calm settle over him.

He had never seen a place like this. It demanded admiration—no, *worship*.

Dean's senses were overwhelmed.

A single tear rolled down the girl's cheek.

Varney's raspy voice cut through the moment like a blade. "Mr. and Mrs. Simmons, allow me to introduce you to your guest for the evening." He pulled a chair back. "Mr. Dean, please have a seat."

Dean nodded, suddenly timid, and shook the hands of his hosts. As before, a chill surged through his arm, biting through his skin like frost.

"Thank you so much for your hospitality," Dean said. "I hope I'm not intruding."

Mr. Simmons smiled and waved a dismissive hand. "Not at all, Dean, not at all. The more, the merrier. My wife and I love meeting new people. We heard you've had some car trouble."

"Yes, sir. I don't know what happened. It just stopped all of a sudden and, well... now I'm here."

"That's no problem at all. Victoria and I are heading north after tonight's performance, and we'd be more than happy to give you a ride. It's about a two-hour drive to the nearest town, but I'm sure you'll find help once we get there."

Dean's face lit up with a grateful smile. "Thank you, sir. That would be great. Thank you."

"Adam, please. 'Sir' is so formal."

"Thank you, Adam."

"Don't even mention it." Adam took a slow sip from his wine glass. "Would you like some?"

Adam poured a fresh glass of wine and passed it to him.

Dean took a sip—and paused.

It wasn't bad. Just... *different*. Thick. Too thick. It didn't taste like red wine. It was sweeter, heavier. Metallic, almost.

He forced a swallow and set the glass down, glancing around to see if anyone else noticed his reaction. No one seemed to.

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Everyone was sipping. Everyone was smiling.

Don't drink anything else, the girl's voice whispered in his head. *You don't want to know what's in it.*

Adam looked to be in his forties, clean-cut and handsome, dressed in a classic black three-piece suit with a maroon tie and a red rose pinned to his lapel. His cufflinks gleamed in the candlelight—engraved copper, with a symbol Dean didn't recognize but found oddly mesmerizing. Adam radiated wealth and refinement, but he wasn't showing off.

Victoria looked slightly younger—mid-thirties, maybe late thirties. She wore her brown curls in a vintage style that reminded Dean of black-and-white films. She was beautiful in a timeless, film-star kind of way, and her voice was gentle, hypnotic. It made everything she said sound like a secret.

Waiters moved through the room with the grace of dancers, carrying trays of glistening hors d'oeuvres and brimming wine pitchers. Dean glanced back at the piano girl.

Her eyes were glowing now—crystalline violet, piercing. Their gaze drilled into him.

Run. Get out of here, her voice whispered in his head, echoing off the walls of his skull.

Dean's lips moved silently. "How do you do that?"

Don't talk. Just think. I can hear your thoughts.

You need to leave. You are in great danger.

Dean's pulse pounded in his ears. His throat dried out. He stared at her, trying to keep his face composed.

What do you mean? I'm stuck here. My car broke down miles from here. There's nowhere to go!

Your car is fine, Dean. There's nothing wrong with it. They made sure you came here. This place is not what it seems.

Who are you? Dean almost said aloud but stopped himself just in time.

I'm trapped here, like you. Only I've been here a very, very long time.

What do you mean? Trapped? Tell me your name—

Stop thinking, Dean. I can't read your mind when you're panicking. We don't have much time, so listen carefully.

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Dean forced himself to breathe, to focus.

What you stumbled into tonight is an ancient fertility ritual, she said, her mental voice urgent. Take a closer look around. Look at the people.

Dean scanned the room discreetly, eyes darting from booth to booth, then to the balcony above.

Everyone was paired off. Intimately. There were no loners. No singles. Only couples.

They're all couples, Dean thought, a cold sweat forming at the base of his spine.

Yes, she replied. Vampire couples.

Dean choked on his drink. Wine sprayed from his nose as he coughed violently, trying to catch his breath, his eyes watering.

"Are you okay, Dean?" Victoria asked, offering him a napkin. Her fingers brushed his hand—cold as tombstone marble.

"Thank you," Dean mumbled, wiping his nose, nostrils still burning.

Vampires. Are you fucking crazy?!

His thoughts screamed so loud, they physically hurt.

A naked girl talking to you by reading your mind—how's that for crazy, Dean? But it's happening right now, isn't it?

Every seventy-five years, when the moon is at its highest point and all the elements are perfect, vampires can have children—if they choose to. Everything you see tonight is carefully orchestrated for that single purpose.

Dean swallowed hard.

How do you fit into all this? How do you even know all of this? How do I know you're not a vampire?

Have you looked at me closely? And I don't mean the childish ogling when you came in. Look at my ears, Dean.

He looked.

And finally, he saw.

Your ears... they're pointy. Like an—

Like an elf, yes. My name is Elska.

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Dean almost choked again.

I was supposed to marry Volunder, our ruler. But I refused. I wasn't in love with him. He couldn't bear the humiliation, so one night he kidnapped me and sold me to Strigori—the old vampire lord. He told my family I had vanished. I've been a slave to the vampires ever since.

Why? Why do they keep you? Why don't you escape? Don't elves have magic or something?

See the white circle on the podium?

Yeah...

It's salt, Dean. Salt burns elves. They reinforced the circle with binding spells. This podium—this stage—is my cage. It's all I've known for centuries.

But why? Just to play piano for them?

Elves represent fertility. Life. Light. Everything vampires are not. In order to create life, they drain me. My energy fuels their reproduction.

The music calms them. Puts them in a trance. Later tonight, they'll begin to mate. That's your only chance to escape.

Dean's blood went cold.

Why am I here?

You're just a snack, Dean. The cigarette after the deed, if you will. Vampire women carrying children need to feed—heavily.

Why are you helping me?

Because I need your help, Dean. I can't wait another five hundred years, hoping someone stumbles in who can free me.

What do I need to do?

When they begin mating, only Varney and a few staff will remain alert. You must cause a distraction—something big—and break the salt circle. That will set me free. Once we're outside... you have to kill me.

What?! Are you insane? I won't kill you. No way. I've never killed anyone—

Dean. Her mental voice was calm, firm. I can't speak to you when you panic. Please. You have to kill me. I want to be free. I've been trapped in this nightmare for centuries. Please, Dean. Promise me.

Tears rolled down her cheeks—again.

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Elska, if we get out of here, you're free. We can move on. We could...

We could what, Dean? Run away together? Have children? Be a couple?

I don't age like you. Your life is a single heartbeat to me. I would watch you wither and die. I loved a human once. I won't do it again.

I'm sorry.

I know. I don't expect you to understand. Just promise you'll help me escape this hell.

Can't you go home if you escape?

No. Volunder would slaughter me—and my family. But when elves die, our spirits pass into another dimension. We rejoin the souls of our ancestors. Death is freedom.

I just... I can't make that promise, Elska. Not yet. I'll try, okay? Let's just get out of here first.

With graceful ease, she transitioned from Mozart's *Lacrimosa* into Beethoven's 23rd Sonata. The room softened again, hypnotized.

Don't ask too many questions now, Elska warned. They're coming.

The double doors creaked open.

Servers entered, each leading a nude woman on a leash.

One by one, the girls were escorted to the booths.

Adam shifted in his seat, practically vibrating with anticipation. A young woman, barely twenty-five, was placed across from Dean. Adam reached across the table and rubbed the collar tag between his fingers like a fetish.

"Natasha," he purred. "Thank you for joining us."

His eyes brimmed with hunger.

Natasha didn't respond. She sat still, expressionless, eyes blank.

Dean waved his hand in front of her face. "Hey. Can you hear me?"

The ice-cold fingers of Victoria gripped his wrist, halting him.

"Now, now, young man," she said sweetly. "Let's not disturb the performance."

"Performance?" Dean asked, confused.

"Have you ever heard of *Nyotaimori*, Dean?" Adam asked.

"No, not that I can think of. Why?"

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"Nyotaimori is a ritual where sushi is served on the body of a nude female. The model is not to speak. She does not move. She is merely part of the experience. Natasha is part of *our* entertainment tonight."

Adam smiled wide.

"So let's enjoy the music... and each other's company."

He and Victoria joined hands. A flicker of black shadow passed between their eyes, like smoke traveling from one soul to another.

Dean's stomach flipped.

Be calm, Dean, Elska said. You'll have to stay very calm. What you see tonight will be horrific—but remember: you're dessert. Not the main course.

Dean sat stiff, eyes wide. His thoughts trembled.

I don't know if I can take this. What's with the girls?

Appetizers.

Dean's pupils dilated. His body went still.

What?!

Look at her eyes.

Dean turned toward Natasha. Her face remained frozen. Her eyes stared into nothing.

A faint film—milky and unnatural—clouded her irises.

She's in a trance, Dean. Already gone. She won't feel a thing.

Won't feel a thing? Dean's thoughts spiraled. *What is there to feel?*

How do you stay calm through all this?

Because, Elska said softly, I've had centuries to watch it happen.

The first time I witnessed it, I was so horrified I couldn't continue playing.

They threw salt on my legs to punish me.

Elska opened her legs slightly, just enough to show Dean the pale scars winding across her inner thighs.

It burned through to the bone. It took months for the wounds to close. Varney kept ripping off the scabs with his nails—just so he could taste my tears.

The second time, I threw up all over the piano... but I kept playing anyway. By the third time, I

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didn't even look anymore.

Their souls are already gone, Dean. They won't feel a thing. You can't save her. Let it go.

Dean gagged. He vomited into his mouth, the bile bitter and hot.

He swallowed it down, barely able to breathe. His stomach twisted violently, his throat burned.

This is insane, he thought. How can you expect me to sit here and let all this happen?

It's simple, Dean.

These women are already dead. Even if you could save them, they'd be hollow. Vegetables. It's you or them—think about that.

I can put you in a trance. You'll still see and hear everything, but your body will be frozen. When the Simmons begin their spell, it won't work on you. They'll ignore you.

You have to trust me.

Dean exhaled slowly. "How will I be able to *do* anything if I'm in a trance?"

Once the mating begins, they'll lose awareness of the outside world. I'll release you from the trance. That's when we act.

Dean took a deep breath. "Okay. I guess I don't have much choice."

Not unless you'd rather be dessert. No? Then listen to me. I'll start the trance now and complete the spell when the Simmons attempt to control you. It will make you calm and focused. Trust me, Dean.

Dean nodded. "Okay. I'm ready."

As Elska began to play Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony No. 4, Dean stared at her hands. He let her voice carry him.

Concentrate on your breathing, Dean. Deep breaths. Feel the air fill your lungs. Hold it.

With each inhale, hold a little longer. Focus on the burn in your chest. Listen to your heartbeat.

Dean closed his eyes. He could feel the pulse in his eardrums, a slow, rhythmic throb.

Let your thoughts match your heartbeat. Become one with the rhythm. Let all your fears go. Listen to my voice.

The pulsing grew steadier. The heat in his lungs turned to fire. Each word from Elska sank deeper into his mind—hooking in and dragging him downward.

Then she started to sing.

It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

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The words were ancient, unknowable—but he could *taste* them. They shimmered as they left her mouth, glowing with soft colors—auras of gold, purple, deep green. Dean's senses melted into one another. He saw sound. He felt color. He tasted light.

And for the first time that night, he felt peace.

Dean? Dean, can you hear me? Elska whispered.

Yes. I can. I feel great.

Good. We're going to make it out of here, okay?

No problem, he replied, floating in her voice.

His body loosened. His fear dissolved. The horror around him drifted away like fog.

Adam reached across the table and took Dean's hand. But this time, Dean didn't feel the chill.

"Dean," Adam said, leaning closer. "I need you to listen carefully." His grip tightened, and his bloodshot eyes bore into Dean's. "Listen closely, my young friend."

Dean could hear Elska's song swelling. It crashed over him like a wave.

His muscles relaxed further. His hands fell open.

Adam's lips moved, but his words were distant, like underwater echoes.

Dean didn't care.

Adam released his hand.

"He's under," he said, turning to Victoria. He kissed her passionately. "Let's eat."

He took Natasha's arm and offered it to Victoria. With a slow motion, he dragged a fingernail along her wrist. The nail sliced deep, cutting into an artery. Blood sprayed.

"Eat, my love. You'll need every drop."

Victoria lunged.

Her mouth latched onto the wound, sucking hungrily, her lips turning slick and red. Dean could hear the awful, wet noise—the slurping, gurgling sound of death. Victoria's face flushed with color as the blood poured into her.

Adam leaned into Natasha. One hand cupped her breast, the other curled around her neck. He opened his mouth. Fangs—long, smooth, and glistening—emerged from his gums.

He bit deep.

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Dean watched helplessly.

Natasha turned pale. Her body sagged, her limbs limp.

Adam and Victoria's faces were soaked in blood.

All around the room, the same scene repeated. Booths full of monsters, feeding on the lifeless women delivered to them.

The only sounds were Elska's piano... and the wet chorus of carnage.

Victoria grabbed Natasha's arm and ripped it from the socket, like tearing apart a roast chicken. Dean flinched.

Not a drop spilled. The corpse was already drained.

Victoria lifted the arm over her face, squeezing it slowly, milking the last dregs from the fingers.

The limb dangled like a squeezed tube of paint. She tossed it aside.

Before it hit the floor, she had already torn off the other arm.

Dean could do nothing.

Even in his trance, panic clawed at the edges of his consciousness. *This is what they'll do to me*, he thought. *This is how it ends*.

Adam grabbed Natasha's head and twisted. The sound of bone cracking echoed over the piano. He smashed the skull against the table like a crab shell and dug in with his teeth, slurping the brain matter, spitting out bits of gray pulp.

Their true faces began to emerge.

Sunken cheeks. Gaunt, leathery skin pulled tight over skeletal jaws. Bat-like skulls with long ears and darting purple tongues. The masks of civility had melted away.

Natasha was now nothing more than a pile of bones, scraps of meat, and gore.

"I love you, baby," Adam whispered, wiping the blood from Victoria's chin.

"I love you too, honey." She kissed his hand, then sucked a piece of tissue out from under his fingernail.

The music shifted again.

Chopin's Fantasia-Impromptu rose from the keys.

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by C. Flemish

The guests wiped their mouths. Staff hurried in, cleaning up the limbs, bones, and spilled organs with frightening efficiency—like they'd done it a hundred times before.

Then Varney entered.

He walked slowly, savoring the attention.

He looked like an old-fashioned ringmaster, complete with tuxedo and gloves. In his hand, he held a crystal chalice, brimming with fresh blood.

He lifted it toward the candlelight, and began to speak—his voice booming, heavy with command.

"Ladies and gentlemen... fellow creatures of the night," Varney announced, raising his chalice. "It is my great honor to be here tonight on this most unique of occasions. This night will forever change your lives—and I am privileged to host this sacred event."

Applause erupted. Low grunts and hissing filled the hall.

"To the creation of life!"

The room thundered in response.

"It is with great pride that I welcome tonight's ceremonial master... Nosferatu's only surviving grandson. Please rise and join me in welcoming... Master Hellevet."

The applause shook the walls. Tables trembled. Glasses clinked.

Elska began to play Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*. The flattering waltz was nearly drowned by the howls and screeches of approval.

Hellevet entered with outstretched arms and a deep, sweeping bow. His cloak rippled behind him like a living shadow.

"Brothers... and beautiful, blood-sucking sisters," he beamed, "welcome. Thank you. It fills me with joy to share this night with so many who bear the blood of my great-grandfather."

He lifted his hand reverently.

"He who gave us life would be proud. Tonight... we attempt what hasn't been done in over a century: to create new life."

The crowd cheered again. Hellevet held up a pale hand, quieting them.

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"Though the stars align every seventy-five years, *true conception* is rare. Tonight, however... tonight, all the elements are perfect. We stand on the brink of a new bloodline—one born of strength, legacy, and sacred hunger."

He stepped forward, more preacher than vampire now.

"Let me be clear—conception is no easy quest. It will test your bond like nothing else. Your wives will need to eat *continuously*. They must consume only the *purest blood*—no rodents, no vagrants."

A hush fell over the crowd.

"Only children's blood or that of virgins will suffice. If she fails to feed even once, the fetus will begin to *devour her from within*. And unlike humans," he paused, "a vampire's gestation does not last nine months... but forty-eight."

Murmurs rose.

"Can you hunt for four years without being seen? Are you willing to sacrifice your safety, even your mate, for the chance to create? If not, leave now. There is no shame in stepping away—only in *failing*."

He paused. Silence. Then—

"But... if you succeed, you will join the highest echelon of our society—creators of the next generation. You will *become legend*."

Varney approached from the shadows, holding a basket.

Soft cries echoed from inside.

Hellevet reached in and lifted a naked infant, squirming in his hands.

"To create life... we must take life."

Gasps echoed. The baby wailed.

From the corner of the room, an old grandfather clock began to strike midnight.

"Hundreds of years ago, my grandfather was born at this precise moment. The stars have aligned once again. Only through drinking the blood of a *direct descendant*, under the same lunar conditions, can we recreate the miracle."

Elska's hands trembled slightly as she transitioned into Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Her eyes closed tightly. She knew what came next.

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Dean remained frozen, his trance intact. He watched helplessly as Adam's face lit up with hunger.

The baby's cry grew sharper, piercing the air.

Hellevet began chanting in an ancient Nordic tongue. His voice rumbled with power. Then, with a sudden, violent jerk, he ripped the infant in half.

The cries ended in a sickening gurgle.

Blood exploded from the infant's body, splashing across Hellevet's face and dripping into his open mouth. He groaned in ecstasy, chewing on the twitching halves.

Varney unbuttoned his master's shirt and pulled it down, exposing his torso—pale, veined, and carved with sigils.

From his belt, Varney pulled a dagger—its handle made of bone, etched with runes. He pressed the silver blade into Hellevet's chest and slowly dragged it downward, splitting the skin from neck to navel. Thick, black fluid oozed from the wound like sap from an ancient tree.

Hellevet continued to gnaw on the baby's remains, drinking every last drop.

"Come now," Varney called out. "The time has come. Drink from the one who gave us life. Drink... and create."

The vampire couples surged from their booths.

They surrounded Hellevet, kneeling, lapping the dark syrup from his open chest like starving dogs.

Then the frenzy began.

They tore at their clothes. Women straddled their mates, shrieking and hissing, biting into their throats as they mounted them.

The room dissolved into an orgy of blood and sex.

Screams, snarls, and moans echoed off the carved oak walls. Bodies collided—flesh against flesh, blood against blood.

The women's faces flickered between the monstrous and the beautiful—twisting, snarling, gasping.

They rode their partners with wild abandon, desperate for seed. Desperate for *life*.

Dean... Elsa's voice called gently. *Come back. It's almost time.*

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His fingers twitched. Blood rushed back into his limbs. Pins and needles surged through his skin.

He turned his head, and bones cracked in protest.

Everywhere he looked—writhing vampires soaked in blood, fucking like animals.

Fuck.

How in God's name are we going to get out of here?

I'll help you, Elska said calmly. They're in a trance now. You could set the room on fire, and they wouldn't notice. Varney is the only one left. He's the only one watching.

When you're ready, come to me. Break the salt circle. Free me.

But the music—won't they notice?

Dean. They have other things on their minds.

How are you feeling?

Like I've been awake for ten days. Dean pinched his fingers. His skin reddened. He was ready.

"Now or never, baby," he whispered. He winked at her.

He stood slowly, careful not to slip on the gore—chunks of what was once Natasha. Blood and bone littered the floor like party confetti.

He moved through the chaos—stepping over tangled limbs, thrusting bodies, open mouths dripping red.

You were right—they don't see me.

He caught a glimpse of Victoria riding Adam. Her body moved in perfect rhythm, each moan timed with a thrust, her fangs sunk into his neck.

All across the room, the women fed as they rode, their lovers writhing beneath them in a symphony of death and orgasm.

Finally, Dean reached the podium.

"Elska..." he said, breathless.

She turned, radiant and calm. "Hi, Dean." She smiled as her fingers glided over the keys. "Are you ready?"

"Am I ever. Is there anything special I need to do?"

"No. Just break the circle. Wipe the salt away so I can step through."

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Dean stared at the symbols woven into the salt—a tapestry of containment.

Then he kicked.

The circle broke. The spell shattered.

He fell to his knees and brushed the salt away, blowing the last of it clear.

He reached for her hand.

"Let's run..."

"Good idea."

Elska took his hand.

And for the first time in five hundred years, she stepped off the podium.

Side-stepping the entangled couples, Elska led Dean to the back of the room. She pushed open the doors, and together they vanished into the kitchen.

Dean scanned the room for an exit, but paused when he saw a bloodstained butcher's apron hanging near the prep table. He grabbed it and handed it to Elska.

"It's not much," he said, blushing, "but it's better than nothing."

"Thank you." She kissed his cheek. The warmth of it lingered.

She slipped on the apron and began rifling through cabinets.

"Look for rice!" she said.

"Rice?" Dean squinted. "What for?"

"Vampires are mathematical creatures," she explained, scanning the shelves. "They hate disorder. If you throw something chaotic in their path, they *have* to count it. It's compulsive. In ancient China, people would leave rice outside their doors. Vampires would stop and count each grain until sunrise."

Dean blinked. "How do you know this?"

She smiled. "I've been around them a long time, and I've picked up on their nasty little habits. Just find the rice."

Dean moved toward the back of the kitchen. He passed a large freezer and peeked through the window—then stumbled back, gagging.

"Elska! Come here," he hissed. She joined him, and he stepped aside.

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Inside, five stainless steel tables stood under fluorescent lights. Young men and women were strapped down, unmoving. Tubes ran from their arms into wall-mounted centrifuges, slowly filling clear blood bags.

"We have to help them," Dean said, short of breath.

Elska's voice was flat. "No, we don't."

"What? Are you serious? We have to—"

"They're *donors*, Dean. Willing bloodletters. Vampire sympathizers. They get paid for this." Her eyes narrowed. "For all I care, they can rot in hell."

Dean flinched. "Jesus."

"Find the rice," she said sharply.

He returned to the back and yanked open a cabinet. "I found some! How much?"

Elska approached, now holding slippers and a large butcher's knife.

"Grab a few boxes. Open them."

She peeked through the kitchen doors into the gala room. "We need to wait for Varney. He's the key. Once he's dealt with, we can run for it."

She barely finished her sentence when Varney stormed into the room. He bolted to the podium, saw the broken salt circle, and let out a primal screech.

He dropped to all fours, sniffing the stage, licking the floor with his purple tongue, tracking their escape like an animal.

Dean leaned into Elska. "Why can't we just go now?"

She turned, eyes hard. "He's the only one not in trance. The only one who can hunt us down. And there's nothing but forest out there. If we run now, he'll catch us. The others will be busy until sunrise—and they can't leave in daylight. By the time they realize what happened, we'll be long gone."

Through the cracked door, Dean watched Varney pause—then launch across the room, following their trail.

"Run, Elska, run!"

They tore through the Crying Wolf, out into the dark parking lot.

Dean gasped for air. "We need a car! Try the doors!"

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They split up, yanking handles, peering through windows. Most were locked tight. Then—*click*.

Dean opened a rusty truck. He checked the glovebox—empty. Flipped the visor—a set of keys dropped into his lap.

“Elska! I got one!” he called.

A gunshot exploded through the night.

“BOY!” Varney’s voice boomed, crackling like radio static. Dean dropped behind the truck, trembling. He shut his eyes tight and *thought*.

Elska, where are you?!

He’s got me, came her whisper.

No. No!

Step out. Have the rice ready. Trust me.

Dean clutched the box and peeked around the hood.

“BOY!” Varney shouted. “You’ve got nowhere to go!”

Dean rose slowly, hands up. “Here! I’m here!”

Varney emerged from the dark, gripping Elska by the hair. His other hand pointed a pistol at Dean.

“After the hospitality we showed you, you *steal* from us?” he spat. “Filthy piece of meat. I should *eat* you alive.”

Dean’s voice shook. “Let her go! You need her! You won’t hurt her.”

Varney licked Elska’s cheek. She shuddered.

“What are you gonna do, boy? Cook rice on the run?” he cackled.

Now, Dean. Throw it now!

Dean hurled the boxes, flinging rice everywhere—over the asphalt, under tires, into the cracks.

“NO!” Varney screamed. “NO! What are you doing?!”

He dropped Elska and fell to the ground, frantically scraping up grains.

“Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...” he muttered. “Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven...”

Dean sprinted to Elska. “Are you okay?”

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"I'm great," she said, hugging him. "He'll be busy for a *long* time."

Varney was still crawling, counting. "*Two hundred twenty-five... two hundred twenty-six...*"

Elska bent down, grabbed the pistol, and tucked it into her apron. "Start the car."

Dean hesitated. "Wait—what?"

"I need to finish this," she said, her voice like ice. "Start the car."

Dean obeyed. The headlights cast long shadows across the lot. From the gloom, Elska emerged, dragging a pickaxe behind her, its metal teeth clattering against the pavement.

Varney was on his knees. "*One thousand thirty-four... one thousand thirty-five...*"

Thunk.

The pickaxe plunged into his chest.

He howled, clawing at the steel lodged in his ribs. "You... you filthy beast. I'll soak you in salt... watch you melt..."

Dark sludge poured from his chest.

Elska kicked him over and yanked the pickaxe free with a sucking sound.

She straddled him. His rancid breath rose against her chest.

"That one," she said, tapping the blade, "was for fun."

She broke the wooden handle against her knee.

"This one... is for me."

Varney spat black blood into her face.

She smiled—and rammed the splintered handle into his heart.

Squish.

His body dissolved into sludge.

She stood, wiping her face with the butcher's apron, and walked to the truck.

Dean rushed to meet her and gently wiped away the blood.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm *great*," she grinned. "I've waited five hundred years to kill that son of a bitch. It feels... amazing."

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Dean opened the door for her. "Let's get the hell out of here."

She nodded—and shot him in the gut.

A flash.

A bang.

Warmth spread through his shirt. Blood seeped down into his pants. He collapsed.

Elska knelt over him.

"Why?" Dean gasped, his hand pressed into the gaping hole in his stomach.

She kissed him, soft and warm.

"You're a sweet boy, Dean. A *really* sweet boy. But I can't let you go. No one can know elves exist. You should've thought of that."

She stepped over him and climbed into the truck.

Inside Dean's mind, he heard her sing.

She's happy, he thought, as the world dimmed.

The truck began to reverse.

White lights flashed.

The last thing Dean saw was the front bumper coming straight for him.

CRUNCH.

Inside the truck, Elska heard the *wet pop* as Dean's skull collapsed beneath the tires.

She shifted back into drive.

And headed toward her first sunrise in five hundred years.

Somewhere down the road, the headlights of the old Camaro flickered to life.

The radio sparked on, hissing static.

Then—

A voice crackled through the speakers, distorted and sharp:

"She's the girl... from the Devil's Whorehouse..."

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The End

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