

Immortal

LOVE STORIES WITH BITE



EDITED BY
P.C. CAST

With Leah Wilson

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Contents

Introduction

P. C. Cast / vii

Haunted Love

Cynthia Leitich Smith / 9

Amber Smoke

Kristin Cast / 27

Dead Man Stalking

Rachel Caine / 5

Table Manners

Tanith Lee / 77

Changed

Nancy Holder / 101

Blue Moon

Richelle Mead / 127

Free

Claudia Gray / 159

About the Authors / 187

Introduction

P. C. CAST

So . . . just what the hell is it with you teenagers and vampires? Huh? Well, 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 a 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 teenager, 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 foreverness vampyres symbolize. At the same time, she's inexorably drawn to the allure of the vampyre, which is best represented in the character of Erik Night, in whom she glimpses the possibility of forever. 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 that 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 Tanith Lee's unique voice and vision. I was a proud mom, smiling at Kristin Cast's world in which vampires 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, and Nancy Holder's post-apocalyptic vision took me on a wild, scary ride.

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.



Dead Man Stalking

A Morganville Vampires Story

RACHEL CAINE

Living in West Texas is sort of like living in Hell, but without the favorable climate and charming people. Living in Morganville, Texas, is all that and a takeout bag of worse. I should know. My name is Shane Collins, and I was born here, left here, came back here—none of which I had much choice about.

So, for you fortunate ones who've never set foot in this place, here's the walking tour of Morganville: It's home to a couple of thousand folks who breathe, and some crazy-ass number of people who don't. Vampires. Can't live with 'em, and in Morganville, you definitely can't live without 'em, because they run the town. Other than that, Morganville's a normal, dusty collection of buildings—the kind the oil boom of the '60s and '70s rolled by without dropping a dime in the banks. The university in the center of town acts like its own little city, complete with walls and gates.

Oh, and there's a secluded, tightly guarded vampire section of town, too. I've been there, in chains. It's nice, if you're not looking forward to a horrible public execution.

I used to want to see this town burned to the ground, and then I had one of those things, what are they called, epiphanies? My epiphany was that one day I woke up and realized that if I lost Morganville and everybody in it . . . I'd have nothing at all. Everything I still cared about was here. Love it or hate it.

Epiphanies suck.

I was having another one of them on this particular day. I was sitting at a table inside Marjo's Diner, watching a dead man walk by the windows outside. Seeing dead men wasn't exactly unusual in Morganville; hell, one of my best friends is dead now, and he still gripes at me about doing the dishes. But there's vampire-dead, which Michael is, and then there's *dead-dead*, which was Jerome Fielder.

Except Jerome, dead or not, was walking by the window outside Marjo's.

"Order up," Marjo snapped, and slung my plate at me like a ground ball to third base; I stopped it from slamming into the wall by putting up my hand as a backstop. The bun of my hamburger slid over and onto the table—mustard side up, for a change.

"There goes your tip," I said. Marjo, already heading off to the next victim, flipped me off.

"Like you'd ever leave one, you cheap-ass punk."

I returned the gesture. "Don't you need to get to your second job?"

That made her pause, just for a second. "What second job?"

"I don't know, grief counselor? You being so sensitive and all."

That earned me another bird, ruder than the first one. Marjo had known me since I was a baby puking up formula. She didn't like me any better now than she had then, but that wasn't personal. Marjo didn't like anybody. Yeah, go figure on her entering the service industry.

"Hey," I said, and leaned over to look at her retreating bubble butt. "Did you just see who walked by outside?"

She turned to glare at me, round tray clutched in sharp red talons. "Screw you, Collins, I'm running a business here, I don't have time to stare out windows. You want something else or not?"

"Yeah. Ketchup."

"Go squeeze a tomato." She hustled off to wait another table—or not, as the mood took her.

I put veggies on my burger, still watching the parking lot outside the window. There were exactly six cars out there; one of them was my housemate Eve's, which I'd borrowed. The gigantic thing was really less a car than an ocean liner, and some days I called it the Queen Mary, and some days I called it Titanic, depending on how it was running. It stood out. Most of the other vehicles in the lot were crappy, sun-faded pickups and decrepit, half-wrecked sedans.

There was no sign of Jerome, or any other definitely dead guy, walking around out there now. I had one of those moments, those *did I really see that?* moments, but I'm not the delusional type. I had zero reason to imagine the guy. I didn't even *like* him, and he'd been dead for at least a year, maybe longer. Killed in a car wreck at the edge of town, which was code for *shot while trying to escape*, or the nearest Morganville equivalent. Maybe he'd pissed off his vampire Protector. Who knew?

Also, who cared? Zombies, vampires, whatever. When you live in Morganville, you learn to roll with the supernatural punches.

I bit into the burger and chewed. This was why I came to Marjo's . . . not the spectacular service, but the best hamburgers I'd ever eaten. Tender, juicy, spicy. Fresh, crisp lettuce and tomato, a little red onion. The only thing missing was. . . .

"Here's your damn ketchup," Marjo said, and slid the bottle at me like a bartender in an old western saloon. I fielded it and saluted with it, but she was already moving on.

As I drizzled red on my burger, I continued to stare out the window. Jerome. That was a puzzle. Not enough to make me stop eating lunch, though.

Which shows you just how weird life in Morganville is, generally.



I was prepared to forget all about Jerome, post-lunch, because not even Marjo's sour attitude could undo the endorphin high of her

burger and besides, I had to get home. It was five o'clock. The bottling plant was letting out, and pretty soon the diner would be crowded with adults tired from a hard day's labor, and not many of them liked me any better than Marjo did. Most of them were older than me; at eighteen, I was starting to get the get-a-job-you-punk stares.

I like a good ass-kicking, but the Good Book is right: It's better to give than to receive.

I was unlocking the door to Eve's car when I saw somebody behind me on the window glass, blocking the blazing westerly sun. The reflection was smeared and indistinct, but in the ripples I made out some of the features.

Jerome Fielder. What do you know, I really *had* seen him.

I had exactly enough time to think, *Dude, say something witty*, before Jerome grabbed a handful of my hair and rammed me forehead-first into hot metal and glass. My knees went rubbery, and there was a weird high-pitched whine in my ears. The world went white, then pulsed red, then faded into darkness when he slammed me down again.

Why me? I had time to wonder, as it all went away.



I woke up some time later, riding in the backseat of Eve's car and dripping blood all over the upholstery. *Oh, crap, she's gonna kill me for that*, I thought, which was maybe not the biggest problem I had. My wrists were tied behind my back, and Jerome had done some work on my ankles, too. The bonds were so tight I'd lost feeling in both hands and feet, except for a slow, cold throb. I had a gash in my forehead, somewhere near the hairline I thought, and probably some kind of concussion thing, because I felt sick and dizzy.

Jerome was driving Eve's car, and I saw him watching me in the rearview mirror as we rattled along. Wherever we were, it was a

rough road, and I bounced like a rag doll as the big tank of a car charged over bumps.

“Hey,” I said. “So. Dead much, Jerome?”

He didn’t say anything. That might have been because he liked me about as much as Marjo, but I didn’t think so; he didn’t look exactly *right*. Jerome had been a big guy, back in high school—big in the broad-shouldered sense. He’d been a gym worshipper, a football player, and winner of the biggest neck contest hands down.

Even though he still had all the muscles, it was like the air had been let out of them and now they were ropy and strangely stringy. His face had hollows, and his skin looked old and grainy.

Yep: dead guy. Zombified, which would have been a real mind-freak anywhere but Morganville; even in Morganville, though, it was weird. Vampires? Sure. Zombies? Not so you’d notice.

Jerome decided it was time to prove he still had a working voice box. “Not dead,” he said. Just two words, and it didn’t exactly prove his case because it sounded hollow and rusty. If I’d had to imagine a dead guy’s voice, that would have been it.

“Great,” I said. “Good for you. So, this car theft thing is new as a career move, right? And the kidnapping? How’s that going for you?”

“Shut up.”

He was absolutely right, I needed to do that. I was talking because hey, dead guy driving. It made me just a bit uncomfortable. “Eve’s going to hunt you down and dismember you if you ding the car. Remember Eve?”

“Bitch,” Jerome said, which meant he did remember. Of course he did. Jerome had been the president of the Jock Club and Eve had been the founder and nearly the only member of the Order of the Goth, Morganville Edition. Those two groups never got along, especially in the hothouse world of high school.

“Remind me to wash your mouth with soap later,” I said, and shut my eyes as a particularly brutal bump bounced my head around. Red flashed through my brain, and I thought about things

like aneurysms, and death. “Not nice to talk about people behind their backs.”

“Go screw yourself.”

“Hey, *three* words! You go, boy. Next thing you know, you’ll be up to real sentences. . . . Where are we going?”

Jerome’s eyes glared at me in the mirror some more. The car smelled like dirt, and something else. Something rotten. Skanky homeless unwashed clothes brewed in a vat of old mat.

I tried not to think about it, because between the smell and the lurching of the car and my aching head, well, you know. Luckily, I didn’t have to not-think-about-it for long, because Jerome made a few turns and then hit the brakes with a little too much force.

I rolled off the bench seat and into the spacious legroom, and ow. “Ow,” I made it official. “You learn that in Dead Guy Driver’s Ed?”

“Shut up.”

“You know, I think being dead might have actually given you a bigger vocabulary. You ought to think of suggesting that to the U. Put in an extension course or something.”

The car shifted as Jerome got out of the front seat, and then the back door opened as he reached in to grab me under the arms and haul. Dead he might be; skanky, definitely. But still: strong.

Jerome dumped me on the caliche-white road, which was graded and graveled, but not recently, and walked off around the hood of the car. I squirmed and looked around. There was an old house about twenty feet away—the end of the pale road—and it looked weathered and defeated and sagging. Could have been a hundred years old, or five without maintenance. Hard to tell. Two stories, old-fashioned and square. Had one of those runaround porches people used to build to catch the cool breezes, although *cool* out here was relative.

I didn’t recognize the place, which was a weird feeling. I’d grown up in Morganville, and I knew every nook and hiding place—survival skills necessary to making it to adulthood. That meant I wasn’t

in Morganville proper anymore. I knew there were some farmhouses outside of the town limits, but those who lived in them didn't come to town much, and nobody left the city without express vampire permission, unless they were desperate or looking for an easy suicide. So I had no idea who lived here. If anyone but Jerome did, these days.

Maybe he'd eaten all the former residents' brains, and I was his version of takeout. Yeah, that was comforting.

I worked on the ropes, but zombie or not, Jerome tied a damn good knot and my numbed fingers weren't exactly up to the task.

It had been quitting time at the plants when I'd gone out to the parking lot and ended up road kill, but now the big western sun was brushing the edge of the dusty horizon. Sunset was coming, in bands of color layered on top of each other, from red straight up to indigo.

I squirmed and tried to dislocate an elbow in order to get to my front pocket, where my cell phone waited patiently for me to text 911. No luck, and I ran out of time anyway.

Jerome came back around the car, grabbed me by the collar of my T-shirt, and pulled. I grunted and kicked and struggled like a fish on the line, but all that accomplished was to leave a wider drag-path in the dirt. I couldn't see where we were going. The backs of Jerome's fingers felt chilly and dry against my sweaty neck.

Bumpity-bump-bump up a set of steps that felt splinter-sharp even through my shirt, and the sunset got sliced off by a slanting dark roof. The porch was flatter, but no less uncomfortably splintered. I tried struggling again, this time really putting everything into it, but Jerome dropped me and smacked the back of my head into the wood floor. More red and white flashes, like my own personal emergency signal. When I blinked them away, I was being dragged across a threshold, into the dark.

Shit.

I wasn't up for bravado anymore. I was seriously scared, and I wanted out. My heart was pounding, and I was thinking of a thou-

sand horrible ways I could die here in this stinking, hot, closed-up room. The carpet underneath my back felt stiff and moldy. What furniture there was looked abandoned and dusty, at least the stuff that wasn't in pieces.

Weirdly, there was the sound of a television coming from upstairs. Local news. The vampires' official mouthpieces were reporting safe little stories, world events, nothing too controversial. Talk about morphine for the masses.

The sound clicked off, and Jerome let go of me. I flopped over onto my side, then my face, and inchwormed my way up to my knees while trying not to get a mouthful of dusty carpet. I heard a dry rattle from behind me.

Jerome was laughing.

"Laugh while you can, monkey boy," I muttered, and spat dust. Not likely he'd ever seen *Buckaroo Banzai*, but it was worth a shot.

Footsteps creaked on the stairs from the second floor. I re-oriented myself, because I wanted to be looking at whatever evil bastard was coming to the afternoon matinee of my probably gruesome death. . . .

Oh. Oh, *dammit*.

"Hello, son," my dad Frank Collins said. "Sorry about this, but I knew you wouldn't just come on your own."



The ropes came off, once I promised to be a good boy and not rabbit for the car the second I had the chance. My father looked about the same as I'd expected, which meant not good but strong. He'd started out a random pathetic alcoholic; after my sister had died—accident or murder, you take your pick—he'd gone off the deep end. So had my mom. So had I, for that matter.

Sometime in there, my dad had changed from random pathetic drunk to mean, badass vampire-hunting drunk. The vampire-hating



Changed

NANCY HOLDER

he vampires invaded New York the night Jilly turned sixteen. She was pacing in front of a club called Watami, waiting for Eli to show, eager to see what he had bought her. He was late, and she knew it was Sean's fault. Sean wouldn't want to come, because it was Jilly's birthday and Sean hated her. But Eli would make him do it, and they would show and she wonder all over again why Eli couldn't love her like that . . . and how he could love someone who didn't like her.

Then, out of nowhere, the place was swarming with white-faced, bone-haired, blood-eyed monsters. They just started *attacking*, grabbing people and ripping open their throats—dancers, drinkers, bartenders, and her three best straight friends, Torrance, Miles, and Diego.

She still had no idea how she'd gotten out of there, but she called Eli first and then her parents. *No service, no service, beepbeepbeep* . . . no texting, no net; no one could freakin' communicate.

She was Jilly Stepanek, lately of the Bronx, a semi-slacker who wanted to go to film school at NYU once she got her grades back up. She had been a neo-goth, into Victorian/Edwardian clothes and pale makeup without the Marilyn Manson vibe, loved steampunk—but now all she was, was another terrified chick on the run from the monsters. Used to be the monsters were in her head; now they were breathing down her neck in real time.

No one stepped forward to represent the vampires or explain why they had taken over the five boroughs like the world's worst gang. There were no demands, no negotiations, just lots of dying. In less than a week, drained corpses—the homeless, first—littered the streets of Manhattan, SoHo, and the Village. As far as Jilly could tell, none of them rose to become vampires themselves. Maybe all the movies weren't true; maybe once they killed you, you were just dead.

The vampires had hunting animals like falcons that dug into their white arms. They were all head and wings, with huge white faces and bloodshot eyes and teeth that clack-clack-clacked like the windup false kind. Blood dripped and splattered onto the ground from the places the bird-suckers gouged their claws into their masters' arms, but—she observed from as far away as possible—either the vampires couldn't feel it or they liked it. Maybe it was their version of cutting.

The bird-suckers swooped and pirouetted across the night clouds, tearing the city pigeons to pieces. A few nights of slaughter and they owned the skies. A few nights more, and there were no wild dogs on the island of Manhattan.

Three nights after her birthday, a vampire attacked and killed her father; its vampire-bird ran her mother to ground while they were running out of their house. Jilly screamed for her mom to run faster, run faster, oh, god, but it swooped down on the back of her mother's head and started pecking and tearing. Her mother fell; her eyes were open but she wasn't seeing a thing. Blood from her neck gushed onto the sidewalk beneath a lamp post, and it looked like her shadow was seeping out of her body.

Hiding in the bushes, heaving, Jilly waited it out. Then she ran the other way, in nothing but a black chemise, some petticoats, her boots, and a long black coat she had bought at a garage sale.

She tried to get to Eli's row house but whole blocks exploded right in front of her, and others whooshed up in flames like paper

lanterns. Weeping and gasping, she phoned him over and over; she texted with shaking hands. *No service no service beep beep beep.*

She raced in circles to get past the fires as the smoke boiled up into the dotted clouds of clack-clack-clacking birds.

By four days after her birthday, the streets were a real jungle. The survivors were as vicious as the street dogs the vampires-birds had eaten: hoarding food, and threatening to kill each other over safe places to sleep and water bottles. She had some experience with hostility, from when she had gone drug-mad. Rehab and a lot of love had redeemed her, but the old lessons were not forgotten.

Dodging fiends and madmen, she stole tons of phones—or maybe she only took them, since there was no one left alive in the stores to ring up the sales—but there was really, really, really no service. Trying to find one that worked became an addiction. At least it gave her something to do—other than hide, and run.

Her therapist, Dr. Robles, used to caution her to ease up, not use her busy brain quite so much. He said she had to let go of loving Eli because people who were gay were gay; there wasn't going to be a change of heart no matter how much she wanted one.

She tried to find a cybercafé that the vampires hadn't gutted, but there were none to be found. She broke into office buildings and tried their computers, but they were fried. She wondered how the vampires did it. She was sure it was part of their plot to take over the world.

Just like the vampires, she slept during the day, in the brightest sunlight she could find, her black coat covering her like a shroud. Even though she had never been a Catholic, she prayed to the God of the crucifix, because crucifixes could hold the vampires at bay. She wanted to pray in St. Patrick's Cathedral but it was too dark and enclosed; she could almost hear the vampires hissing in the chapels lining the sanctuary. Her lips were cracked and chapped. She was filthy. But maybe God would help her anyway.

Please, God, please, God, please, God, please God, please please please don't let Eli get burned to death or sucked dry by the demons amen.

High rises burned down to ash; cars exploded, and the vampires capered on stacks of the dead. And Jilly staggered through it like the last victim of the Apocalypse. No one hooked up with her and she didn't make any effort to take on a sidekick or become one. She had to get to Eli; at least she could die with him.

So she kept skirting the crazily burning buildings in her tattered bad-fairy gear, the indigo in her hair bleached by the sun and coated with dirt. She showed people the photograph of him she always carried in her coat pocket. *No, Jilly, no, Jilly, no, Jilly, no Jilly, no Jilly, no no no sorry, loser.*

She kept waiting for the fires to burn down, burn out. The smoke took a toll on her; the air smelled like someone barbecuing rotten hot dogs; she felt it congealing in her lungs and coating her skin. Five days after her birthday, she was so tired she could hardly breathe anyway, which was a sort of blessing because maybe she would die and then she could stop everything. Escaping the bad was also one of her habits. She was empty, outside and in, just a husk. If a vampire tried to suck her blood, it would probably find nothing but red powder.

She really thought that the time had come for her to die. She thought about her parents, and her friends, but mostly she thought about Eli Stein. He had been her first and only love, before he had realized he was gay. She still loved him; she would always love him, no matter what form his love for her would take. *Brainbrain, go away, obsess again some other day . . .*

He was crazy-mad for Sean instead and she hoped . . .

No, she couldn't even think that. If she went anywhere near praying for something to happen to Sean . . .

You are evil, Jilly, and you deserve to die.

Beneath her coat, she fell asleep and dreamed of Eli, and Sean; because in the summer after tenth grade that was who they were, Eliandsean, like one person, like the person she had hoped to become with him. Once Eli had found his other half, they had come to her house almost every day, because they could hold hands there.

They could brag about their slammin' skillz on their skateboards and video games like any other teenage boys, and they could flirt with each other and sit on the couch with their arms around each other while Jilly's mom brought them sodas and grilled cheese sandwiches. They were amazed and delighted by the acceptance in Jilly's house. Tolerance, in her house, came after a hard struggle, won by determined parents who never let go of Jilly, even after she ran away with a biker, shaved her head, and told her shrink there were no bones in her hands.

It was all crazy in a new way; taggers wrote VAMPIRES SUCK over every surface there was, and people tried to share whatever information they'd learned about them: they were mindless, they were super-smart; they had a leader, it was all random. They lured you in with dark sexuality. They attacked you like animals without a plan. It had something to do with global warming; they were terrorists. They were a plague created by the government.

She saw plenty of them. White-faced and leering, they darted down streets and stared out of windows, like terrible Will Smith CGI effects. She didn't know how she hadn't been killed yet, with all the near misses. One thing she did know, they were more like people than beasts. Just very evil people. Their birds were mindless attackers, but the vampires themselves listened to music and went joyriding on motorcycles and kept the subway people alive so they could go on rides; *it's a dead world after all.*

After another near miss—a vampire turned a corner just ahead of her, and she turned on her heel and ran, hard—she broke down weeping, her thin stomach contracting; and then God must have

taken the hint, or felt guilty, or whatever, but He/She/It/They did something miraculous:

It began to rain. Hard. Buckets poured down from heaven like old lady angels washing their doorstoops; gallons and rivers tumbled onto rooftops and treetops like all the tears of all the New Yorkers, like all the blood that had gushed out of the necks of the dead.

And the rain toned down the fires just enough that she soaked her coat and then raced through the fire line, arriving on the other side into some kind of hellish otherworld; everything was covered with gray and white-bone ash: trees, buildings, abandoned cars, rubble. She shuffled through layers of powdery death.

And there it was. *There it was.*

Eli's row house. With the formerly turquoise paint and the American flags and some kid's ash-colored tricycle overturned in a pile of ash like strange granular leaves. Then she thought she saw a shadow move across the window, and she stared at it for a long time, because she had actually made it, and in her heart she'd expected there to be no signs of life. There were no more shadows and she wondered if she had gone crazy or died and imagined the whole thing. By then, Jilly was certain the dead could be as crazy as the living. She staggered up the stoop stairs, kicking up layers of death that made her gag and choke.

She knocked on the door, but no one answered, and she pushed it open.

Eli and his father faced each other in the living room with the old tapestry of the Jews at Masada hanging over the upright piano. Eli looked taller and thinner, his dark hair long as ever, and he had a semi-beard. He looked like a leftist rabbi in the NYU sweatshirt she had given him. Mr. Stein was still Mr. Stein, in a navy blue sweater and dark trousers.

Mr. Stein was shouting. "You stupid faggot, you're going to die out there."

“Just shut up!” Eli shrieked. “Stop calling me that!”

“Eli,” she whispered from the doorway. “Eli, it’s me.”

They both turned.

“Jilly!”

Eli whooped, gathered her up, and hugged her against himself. She felt as light as a desiccated leaf, unbelievably dizzy, and reeling with happiness. Eli was alive. He was safe. And he was still here, in his old house, living indoors, with his parents.

“Oh, my God, are you okay?” he asked; and then, before she could answer, he said, “Have you seen Sean?”

“No,” she said, and he deflated. She saw the misery on his face, felt it in the way he nearly crushed her.

In the kitchen, his gaunt, black-haired witchmother was *cooking*, as if nothing had changed. They had electricity, and gas, and as Jilly smelled the hot food—onions, meat—her mouth began to salivate. She burst into tears and he held her tightly, swaddling her in himself. He smelled so good. So clean. Almost virginal.

His father’s eyes bulged like an insect’s and he stared at Jilly, as if she were an intruder.

“I’ve been trying to get here,” she said. “Everything was on fire. And then the rain came.”

“The rain,” Mr. Stein said reverently, glancing at the tapestry.

“Now we can look for Sean.” Eli said.

“Don’t speak that name.” Mr. Stein snapped.

For God’s sake, what do you care about that now? she wanted to snap back at him. But she took Eli’s hand and folded it under her chin. She saw the layer of ash-mud on her hands and wondered what she looked like. A zombie, probably.

“I was just about to leave, to search for him,” he said, bringing her knuckles to his mouth. He kissed them, then laid her hand against his cheek. His tears dampened her skin, like more rain. “He called just before it happened, from midtown. I don’t know what he was doing there. We had a fight. I was lying down.”

Weren't you going to meet me at the club?

Eli searched Jilly's face with his fingers and she felt each brush of his fingertips close a wound the long days and nights had cut into her soul. There was no one she loved more. She would go to her grave loving Eli Stein.

"Of course you're not leaving now. Look at her. She looks like she's dead." Mr. Stein had never liked her. Not only was she formerly a mad slut, she wasn't Jewish, and her family had given Eli and Sean safe harbor to commit their carnal atrocities.

"You need to fix the door," Jilly said. "Or at least to lock it."

"I thought it was locked," Mr. Stein said. He looked at Eli. "Did you unlock it?" He walked to the door to check it, passing close by Jilly so that she had to take a step out of his way. He grabbed the door; she heard a click, and then he turned the knob.

"It's broken." He glared at Eli. "Did you break it?"

"Dad, why would I do that?" Eli asked.

"Maybe vampires tried to get in last night," Jilly ventured. "You need to put up some crucifixes. They really do work."

Mr. Stein crossed his arms over his chest. "Not normal," he muttered.

"Dinner is almost ready," Mrs. Stein announced from the kitchen, smiling weakly. Jilly wondered where on earth she had found a brisket. In the still-working refrigerator of their house, she supposed.

Eli gave her a look that said, *My parents have lost their minds, obviously*. He had some experience with mental illness, since he was her best friend.

She didn't smile, even though, as usual, they were thinking the same thing. It wasn't funny. She didn't know who was crazy and who wasn't.

"You could take a shower, Jilly," Mrs. Stein continued.

Jilly was too weak and exhausted to take a shower. But Mrs. Stein gave her some mashed potatoes and a piece of cheese and they ener-



Free

A Story of Evernight

CLAUDIA GRAY

New Orleans
Summer 1841

The house on Royal Street was as refined as any other in New Orleans. Cast-iron scrollwork decorated the gate that enclosed the small garden, where a profusion of hydrangeas bloomed in crimson and violet. No loud parties ever took place within, and the oil lamps always dimmed at a reasonable hour. The honey-colored paint was in good taste, as were the modest, fashionable gowns worn by the ladies who lived there.

Yet it was not a respectable house.

“You mustn’t pay those ladies any mind.” Althea plaited Patrice’s hair as she spoke, her fingers quick and sure. Althea was Patrice’s mother, although Patrice was not allowed to call her “Mamma” when anyone else was around. Lately, Patrice had not bothered to call her that in private, either. “Just jealous, every last one of them. What wouldn’t they give for a dress made of real Parisian satin? They’re poor. You and I—we will never be poor.”

“They didn’t say we were poor. They said we—that we were bought and paid for.”

Althea’s hands closed around Patrice’s shoulders. The fine cotton of her chemise wrinkled beneath Althea’s grip. “We are free women of color,” she said quietly. “We will never be slaves. Never.”

Patrice had seen slaves working on the levee, without even hats or scarves to shield them from the punishing sun, sweat gleaming on their skin as overseers cursed them to work even harder. She had seen girls years younger than herself scrubbing front stoops on their hands and knees, knuckles ashy and raw from lye. She had seen scars around wrists and ankles, the red ugly welts that showed where shackles had once been. And she knew that cruelties like these took place in other refined houses in the French Quarter, in New Orleans, throughout the South. No, Patrice and Althea were more fortunate than any slaves.

But being a free woman of color did not mean being truly free. This was even more true for Patrice and her mother—who lived in luxury provided by wealthy white men in an “arrangement” that felt as unbreakable as any chain.

Once Patrice’s hair had been braided into elaborate buns and loops, Althea treated her like some fragile glass trinket that might shatter before the ball. “Don’t you even think about lying down and flattening your hair,” Althea said as she loosely tied a lace scarf around Patrice’s head. “You can sleep all day before tomorrow’s dance if you’re tired.”

Patrice, who had made other plans during her mother’s afternoon naps for months now, simply nodded.

After Althea had left her alone, Patrice watched the clock on the mantel. Mr. Broussard had brought it as a gift after his last trip to Europe—a gift for her, not for her mother. This attention had angered Althea, who had spoken sharply to Patrice for a week afterward. Patrice suspected that was why she was being presented this summer instead of the next, when she would be sixteen.

As if I would want such a monstrosity, Patrice thought as she looked at the bronze nymphs surrounding the clock face. The clock’s creator had taken great pains to prominently display all the nymphs’ uncovered breasts. *As if I would want any attention from Mr. Broussard.*

Of course, Althea and Patrice both knew that what Patrice wanted didn't matter.

Once twenty minutes had passed, Patrice rose and swiftly put on a simple calico housedress and a pair of slippers. The stairs creaked as she hurried downstairs, but Patrice didn't worry. Althea, like most free residents of New Orleans, was sound asleep. The June heat and humidity were so punishing that free people did not attempt to do anything at midday except nap. The whole city fell quiet, and it became very easy to avoid being seen.

Patrice tiptoed out the back door toward the shade provided by a magnolia tree's broad, shining leaves. She was still blinking, blinded by the sun, when two hands reached out from that darkness and grabbed her.

"Amos," she whispered, before his mouth closed over hers.

They sank to their knees together, wrapped in each other. Amos's embrace was tight, almost demanding, but after the first few eager kisses, he pulled back. They smiled at each other, giddy as always with their successful escapes.

"Lookin' fancy," he said. With one finger, he lifted the edge of her lace scarf to peek at the complicated hairdo beneath. "Wish I could see you tonight, when you dress up so fine."

"I wish too." Patrice leaned against his broad chest. Blacksmithing had made his muscles as thick as cordwood. He smelled like ashes and horses, like the earthy, dirty real world that she'd been sheltered from throughout her life.

She did not find the smell unpleasant. Amos's clothes carried the scent of his work. This reminded her that, despite his poverty, Amos was freer than she would ever be.

Amos's former master was widely considered to be a soft, foolish person by the finer residents of New Orleans—a subject of ridicule by the proper white ladies who would cross the street to avoid walking near women like Althea. This master had allowed Amos to train as a blacksmith, then hired him out to people at reasonable wages.

Many slave owners did this for various skilled trades. But Amos had been allowed to keep part of his wages. Amos was so skilled at his craft, so very much in demand, that within only a few years he had saved enough to buy his own freedom. And his master had let him! The gossips in town could devise no explanation for such eccentricity.

“This party tonight.” Amos said abruptly. “They don’t make up their minds right away, do they? It wouldn’t happen as soon as that.”

Patrice had hidden from this hard truth as long as she could. They had to face it now. “No, probably nobody will pay court to me tonight. But somebody will, Amos, before the season’s over. What difference does it make, if it’s tonight or two months from now?”

“Two months with you is worth a lot to me. Especially if it’s the last two months we ever have.” Warily, Amos leaned back against the trunk of the magnolia tree. “If Althea would’ve waited one more year, I could’ve put enough money aside. Enough to get a couple rooms for us. We might have been husband and wife.”

“I don’t think she would ever have let me marry.”

“Let you? *Let* you?” Amos was not angry, only disbelieving. “Your problem is you were never a slave. You don’t know what it means, bein’ free. If you did, you wouldn’t abide her ‘letting’ you do a thing.”

“Amos—”

“Why wouldn’t Althea let you marry? Why wouldn’t she want somethin’ decent for you, instead of—”

He didn’t say the rest aloud. That was his way of being kind.

“She wants grandchildren who will have even lighter skin than mine,” Patrice said. “She wants to know that there will always be a wealthy white man’s name to use if the patrollers stop me—so nobody can ever claim that I’m not free.”

Probably Althea also wanted a source of support if Mr. Broussard ever tired of her, but Patrice never spoke of that. She didn’t even like thinking about that possibility, because if Althea could someday be abandoned, Patrice could be too.

Amos sighed heavily, his anger exhausted. They always came back to this in the end—to resignation, regret, and yearning for everything they'd been denied. "I imagine it sometimes. You and me. How it might be for us."

"I do too."

In truth, Patrice had no idea whether she could be a good wife to Amos. To be a poor man's wife, she would have to cook and churn butter and scrub clothes on a washboard—chores she'd never had to learn how to do. Althea had never learned either. Slave girls belonging to Mr. Broussard came over each day to take care of such things. Sometimes the slaves' disdainful stares hurt more than those of the white ladies. They would look up from their work, hair hidden under kerchiefs, eyes narrowed, as if to say, *Who do you think you're fooling?*

How they would have laughed, if she had thrown her wealth away to marry Amos. But it would have been worth it, if she and Amos could only have had a chance.

She put her hands on either side of his face, and they kissed again. What began gently soon became more intense. Amos leaned her backward, into the soft carpet of fallen magnolia leaves, and his heavy body covered hers. His homespun shirt was open at the neck, and she could feel the warmth of his skin through her thin dress.

They had never become lovers, because Amos had old-fashioned ideas. Patrice, who could not afford to be old-fashioned, arched her body against his so that he would feel the swell of her breasts, the tautness of her belly.

"If only you were my wife," he whispered against her throat. "How I could love you."

"You could love me now, if you only would."

He pushed her aside, almost roughly, and his face twisted into a grimace. Then he looked at her, his eyes desperate. "Leave with me. Tonight, after the party."

"Amos!"

“We can do it.” He clutched at the sleeve of her dress. “A blacksmith can find work anywhere. All we have to do is go.”

“We don’t have the money.” This was no time for foolishness. “We don’t know a soul outside New Orleans. If we ran away, we could never call on any of our white folks for help, not ever again. How long do you think we’d stay free? A month? A week?”

Amos’s shoulders sagged. The truth had defeated him.

She put her hand upon the open V exposed at the neck of his shirt. “I don’t want some white man to be the first to touch me.”

“I don’t want to do you shame.”

“We love each other. There’s less shame in that than—than anything else I’ll ever have.”

They were silent together for a while longer, and she watched Amos’s face carefully. In his eyes were his love and desire for her, doing battle with his idea of what was respectable for them both. Patrice had never been respectable, not really, so she couldn’t understand why it was so hard for him to choose. When she saw the slight relaxing of the tension in his broad shoulders, she felt she had won.

Patrice whispered, “My room is in the back of the house. The small balcony—you know the one?” Amos nodded. “I’ll leave the shutters unlatched. We should be home no later than midnight. Come—maybe an hour later than that. You’ll be all right if you have your papers; people know you. All right?”

She still thought he might refuse, out of misguided devotion to her. But he said, “I’ll come to you.”



Amos departed before the sun had left its zenith. Patrice went inside and took a hasty sponge bath, so that her mother would not smell horses and ashes on her skin. By the time Althea had awakened, Patrice sat demurely on the chaise in the parlor, wearing her silk wrapper and reading Coleridge’s *Ballads*.