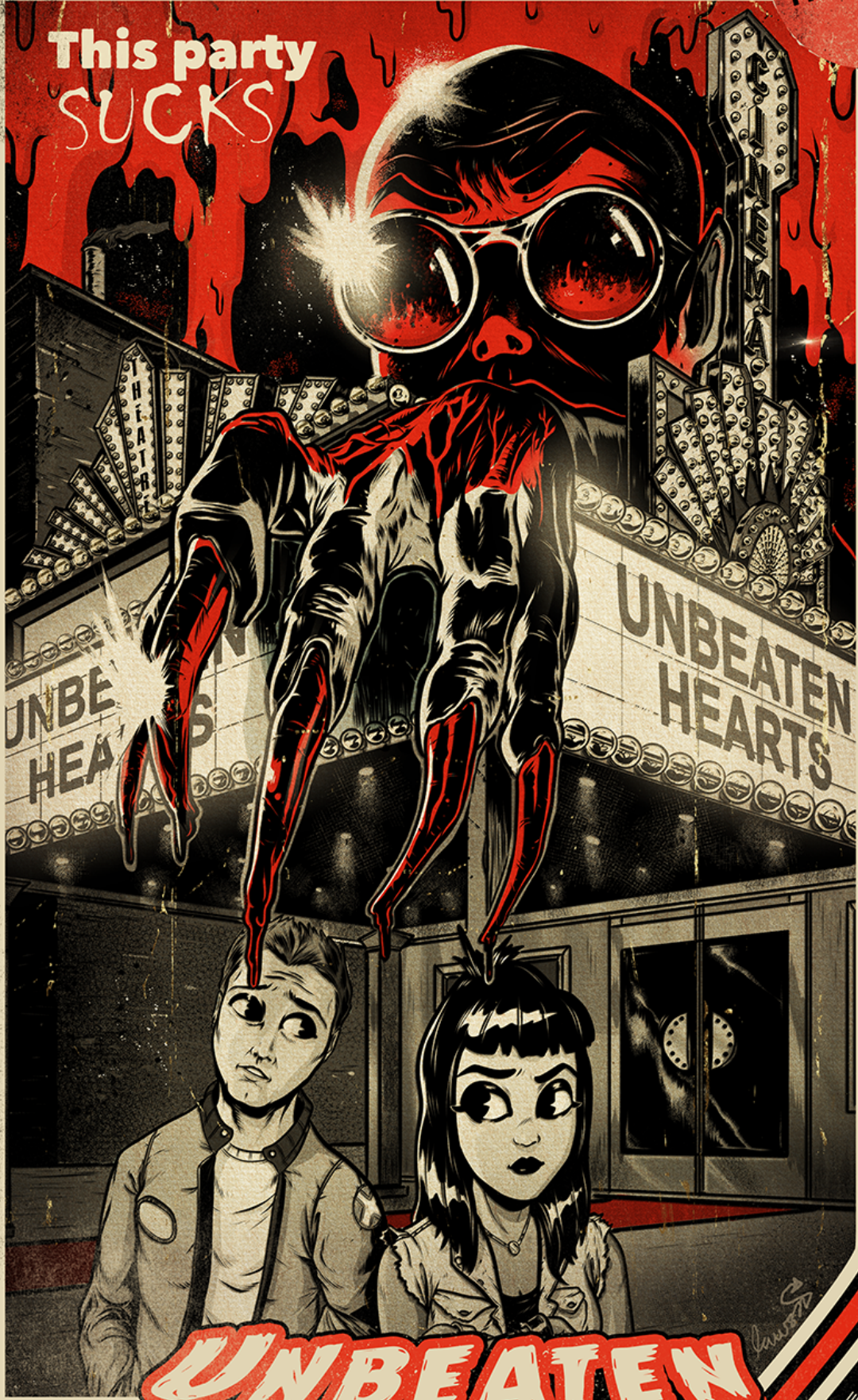


Directed by Chris Stansell

HORROR

This party
SUCKS



UNBEATEN
HEARTS

STEREO

Chapter 1

"Come to me," she called into the darkness to the shrouded figure, reaching out her hand to it.

Step by step it came, his yellow eyes shine golden a moment before the perfectly chiseled face comes into focus. From him emits a glow, much as the one he can never once more feel upon his cold, pale skin, perfectly smooth and polished as some rare stone...maybe like a nice onyx, just white.

She draws breath, it lingers inside her a moment longer unable to exhale in his gaze.

"I can't be with you...not...," his brow furrows in search of the words, "...out there."

The words sting, her jaw clenches and her bottom lip quivers. Without pause she runs to him, throwing herself into his bare chest. She shivers from the cold, the chill of his skin runs through her but all she can do is grab tighter, pull closer, and listen.

"There's...there's nothing there any more, just an empty cavern inside me," with hand moving to her shoulder, "...a tomb where no flowers may lay as the door has long rusted over"

"NO," she exclaims turning her upwards to him, "not empty, not a tomb, there is still a heart inside you and a heart that loves me."

As if in slow motion he leans down, the luscious locks of hair flow down as some beautiful, furry waterfall upon her. Just as she can feel the chill of his lips nearing her's, he jerks away.

"A heart that is," turning his head he looks into the distance, "...unbeaten...for so long and to never be not unbeaten again."

He goes to leave her, but she grabs hold of him. He knows that he could easily overpower her, a great beast like him and her...so dainty, so frail, so innocent, with no chance of stopping him...and yet, here he was, stopped by her hands upon him. With ease her hand glides down his neck, down to his chest, stopping to feel, her palm against his breast.

"I will beat it for you," he slowly turns as she continues, "and I'll beat it for as long as it takes for you to feel again, to..."

"Love," he completes her.

She moves her mouth towards his, he brings his to meet hers. A cool and warm mixture of mouths combine, a hurricane of passion and feeling, a brooding storm within both of them and now they are within the eye of that storm with no escape than through one another.

Pushing her hand hard into his chest, he is pulled from the trance of their embrace, shuddering beneath the touch. To feel even the slightest movement within him, long dead, now centimeters of blood moved throughout him. His breath grows bated, looking into her eyes, she sees his...weakness.

"Again," he pleads.

She pushes her palm once more into his chest. Again he shudders, knees growing weak beneath him.

"Harder," he begs.

She pushes into him again, feeling the muscles in his perfectly sculpted chest give way and almost, just almost she can feel the most important muscle growing beneath her grip. Using her free hand she grabs him by the neck, pulling him into her and her hand, he meets her and exhales in ecstasy, at life itself being brought back to him.

"That's it, baby," he exclaims, "keep going, I can feel it, the love, the explosion of passion is co-"

The screen freezes, the frame a less than flattering visage of one Edmund's face mid-beat. A remote falls across the coffee table, the exploding vampire's face filling the small living room's atmosphere.

On the couch an equally unflattering scowl has found its way upon the face of Harris, though her's seems to be rooted in something quite the opposite of an exploding passion hurricane as the movie before her has played out. Looking down she flips through the pages of the book, searching for some kind of explanation to what she's witnessed.

"Wait, so do they know that it's a metaphor for handjobs," she asks to the empty room, not looking up from the book.

A loud grunt she can only assume was supposed to be something resembling a misunderstanding "huh" comes from the kitchen, along with a clatter of silverware.

"Like did she mean to write it to push the first base agenda?"

Coming out of the kitchen, her boyfriend Skye is sorting through a handful of utensils but has made the journey to address her questions head on.

"What are you talking about handjobs? 'Unbeaten Hearts' is written for teenagers, I don't think Carrie Waits was writing about jerking off."

Looking up from the book, she gives him a raised eyebrow.

"Are you serious? Look at him," she points to the screen and the frozen vamp, "You, me, and poor Billie there are all in Eddie's splash zone right now."

Skye walks over to the couch and sits down, clearly thinking about the possibility that Harris could be right...though even if she is he would never admit it.

"Come on," he retorts shaking out the mental image of Eddie's sparkly plasma spill, "why can't you just enjoy it for what it is without making it something gross?"

Shaking her head in disbelief, she tosses the book over to him.

"She's literally telling him that she'll beat it for him. I mean what kind of message is that sending to the readers? That if your stupidly handsome undead boyfriend gets moody just give him a little palm action and he'll love you again?"

"I really think you're reading into this way too much," he says, flipping through the pages.

Harris walks over to the VCR and ejects the tape, sliding it back into its case. Skye is reading through the book when suddenly he gets a flash of realization.

"Hey, why did you say handjob were first base," he asks causing her to freeze.

"So what's up with all the spoons," she responds turning around and heading back to the couch.

"Why are you answering my question with a question with a question?"

"Because I'm going to pretend to care what you're doing with our silverware unless you REALLY want to get the answer to your question," she responds with a slight hint of matter of fact.

Thinking it over for a moment, Skye throws the books to the side and picks up the utensils.

"Well I figured it'd be good to come in character for this party, so I was seeing if we had any silver for my bandoleer."

"You have a bandoleer?"

"You don't?"

"Ugh," she responds, flopping down face first into the couch. "why do we have to go to this stupid thing again?"

"I thought you were looking forward to it?"

Adjusting, she scoots awkwardly onto her back to face him, her expression is one of complete and utter distaste.

"Why do you think I would like this?"

"Because it's a horror themed party?"

"Horror?!", she exclaims, "You think this dime store garbage is horror?"

"What's wrong with dime stores?"

Sitting up, she snatches the book from beside him, holding it up to present the cover. The words "Unbeaten Hearts" glimmer with a red embossed above a black and white embrace of Eddie and Billie.

"This isn't horror, this is drivel written for masses. The same masses that wanted to complain about every REAL horror movie that they would get all preachy about but then secretly watch and love only to then go out and bash the next day."

Skye rolls his eyes and takes the book back.

"If it was a real horror story, Eddie would crack open little Billie's jugular and drink her dry without a second thought."

"And what makes you so sure of that?"

She looks up at him, her eyes intense.

"Because...Skye," she turns and stare into the distance, "there's something I've never told you."

"Stop."

"I'm not who you think I am," she dramatically responds ignoring him, "I am...a creature of the night...and I've come to suck you dry!"

With that she jumps on top of him, clawing at him and biting his neck, he fights which just makes her incorrigible actions more focused. She stops feeling something against her chest, leaning back she finds that there is now a teaspoon pushed against her. Slowly she looks up from it to him.

"What are you gonna do," she asks in the closest attempt at a Southern husky voice, "beat me off?"

"Maybe later," he responds, "but now we've got to get ready for the party."

Another long drawn out ugh escapes her as Harris flops to the couch once more in protest. This time Skye gets up moving to the kitchen to continue work on his costume.

She'd lost count how many times she'd flopped on that couch over the years with Skye, sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes really good but she knew it was a lot. Staring up she count the ceiling stains she'd grown so familiar with, she welcomed them as if they'd always been there for her and her them. There was the one from the spaghetti fight their first week, or what they called spaghetti. The idea of

ramen noodles and ketchup cooked in a microwave seemed like a good idea at the time but upon tasting both had refused to take another bite, instead satiating their hunger by chasing each other, trying to force feed it to one another before a misstep had lead to the bowl flying into the wall. Most of it had come off but that one little speck had made it all the way to the ceiling. At the time she said she'd wait to clean it til they had a step ladder, or at least something more secure than a couple boxes of unpacked wrestling magazines and anime tapes but even when they got a step ladder, she left it. That little speck had traveled all that way, maybe it deserved its place up there. Besides, it was definitely her favorite of the stains, all with their own stories but none as warming as that one.

The burning orange shines through the endless cityscape, headlights flip on as the beat up Oldsmobile chugs through the sea of asphalt. Darting back to a cacophony of horns, the little brown tank that could makes its way down.

Slamming her fist into the steering wheel, the car emits a long, dull honk that seems to go on with no end.

"Get out of the fucking road, idiot," Harris screams out the window as she passes a pedestrian.

"Pretty sure that guy had the right of way."

The brakes slam as a yellow light that seemed was going to last a bit longer shines back with a blocking red glow. The pair jostle a bit before coming to a stop and on cue she turns to meet his worried glare as he grabbed tightly to the small bit of plastic above the door...as if that would do anything his broken seat belt would surely fail to.

"Sweetheart," she starts in that tone that never fails to scare him, "you wanted me to pull double d duty tonight so you could get white girl wasted with your friends."

"And I've already told you how much I appreciate you for doing so," he replies, "and how

I'll on dish duty for the next week."

"Then let momma drive the way momma wants to drive...because if you don't let me I'm going to drive you to the nearest crackhouse and sell that pretty little ass of yours off for some low quality smack," she says peering into him, "and the best part?"

"What?"

"You're washing and drying now."

The light turns green and the hunk jerks forward without as much as a glance to the intersection in front of her.

As the car picks up speed, she seems to come down from her bout of road rage.

"I'm not sure why you're so upset about this party?"

"I'm not upset," she responds with a sigh, realizing she may be coming harsher than she means, "just seems like a waste of time to go to some big party thrown by the spoiled chick you knew from high school."

"You wanted to go at first, what happened?"

"Yeah, I wanted to go when you said it was going to be a kickass horror Halloween party...not an excuse to dredge up some bullshit vampire wannabe series."

"Well at least it's going to be scary for you."

Her eyes jerk to him, not fully appreciating the joke.

"Come on, it's funny," he pushes back with, "besides, maybe it would be more fun if you actually gave into it a little, you know, maybe like a costume at least?"

He motions to her wardrobe, which at the moment consists of a pair of studded boots, jeans, her go to leather jacket/denim vest and favorite band shirt sporting a particularly demonic looking figure and the lettering of "DISRESPECTRE" across the chest in perfect Gothic print.

"I am in costume," she responds with a bit of scoff, offended at his accusation.

"You're in costume? How is this any different from your every day get up?"

"I actually wore underwear tonight," she turns giving him an over exaggerated wink.

"Cute," he returns, "I know you're pissed I'm dragging you to this but you've always wanted to see where I came from," turns away and slumps into his seat, "could at least fake it."

Rolling her eyes she reaches over to him, "come on, dummy, give me that big dopey head."

He turns unconvinced at the sincerity, her wiggling fingers beckoning.

"Longer you wait, the longer I'm driving with one hand and that's probably a bad idea."

Scooching over, he momentarily sits just outside her grasp before slightly leaning his head just in her reach. She plays with his hair, scratching behind his ear comically.

"There's a good puppy," she says before pulling her hand back.

"Honestly, what is your deal with this thing?"

"I don't have a deal," she starts before catching a glance at his unconvinced look, "ugh,

fine. You went to a way better school alright and I'm sure you were all jocking it up with all your friends with your letterman jackets and homecoming parades."

"You realize I wasn't a real jock."

"Did you do sports?"

"Of course, you know that."

She turns judgmentally, "Then you a jock."

"You know that's not the case and even if it was, who cares?"

She doesn't respond, just looks ahead at the road. Studying her, he can tell she's holding back and he believes to know just what it is. He leans back, a sense of smug stretches across his face.

"You think I was too cool for you," he says crossing his arms, "that if we'd gone to the same school I'd just be some jerk that ignored you for a bit of cheerleader pom pom."

"No."

"Need I remind you that even though we were states apart, I was just as broody and dark as you? That while my buddies were out getting stoned, I was making zombie movies in the woods with my real friends."

"What a dork," she mutters trying to hide the smile.

"Oh, now I'm a dork huh," he chuckles at, "I guess you need reminding you that this dork is the one that introduced you to that favorite band of your and had to practically drag you because you were too hardcore for them," he says making punchy dance moves.

Reaching over she grabs a lighter out of the door and throws it at him, "You shut your whore mouth!"

Skye catches it slipping the lighter into his pocket, laughing at the nerve he'd hit. She shoots him a death glare before going back to the road.

"...just," she starts, "...I don't know, maybe you realize that you'd rather be with some other, less mean, chick than me and this is the thing that reminds you."

Skye looks over and see she's actually upset at the thought a little.

"Shit," he lets loose before sitting up in his seat, "is this because I told you I had a crush on Rae?"

"I mean, what's not to love about a spoiled prom queen that's probably run face first into enough douche dong over the past 10 years to realize maybe she should have given

that lovable loser a chance and invited him to her party to try and steal him away from his wrong sides of the track girlfriend."

"I don't think that's...exactly what happened with Rae," he says giving Harris a reminding cue.

Catching herself, she composes, mildly embarrassed that her spike of irrational jealousy caused her to slip, "I'm sure they're not anything like that."

"Thank you," he quips, turning back to the dash in front of him.

"Hopefully they've been able to avoid most of the facial dong abrasions over the last decade," she jokes, trying to cover up for the mistake again along with making a mental note for the rest of the evening.

"Wait..what tracks? Do we even have a railroad system?"

"Point is..."

"No, I get the point," he reaches over to her, placing a hand on her leg, "yes, I had a crush on a cute blonde for a semester of Physics sophomore year and yes that may have carried over for a few years after that...and yes, maybe I embarrassed myself when I wrote a poem about how they should date me instead of whatever asshole they were seeing at the time-"

"The love became my burden and I was too weak to carry," she responds in her best Shakespearean tone.

"Please don't."

"Watching, I want to protect you but cannot because of my cowardice. "

"Harris."

" My heart pours out the blood of my memories with no remorse, and slowly I die bene-" she tries to continue but he cuts her off.

"Listen to me," he shouts.

The car rolls to a stop in front of a traffic light. She looks over at him, his face bathed in the blood red glow of the light.

"None of that other shit matters now," he picks up his hand, placing it upon her face, she subconsciously turns her cheek to fit his palm, "I'm with you and I love you and the only reason we're going to this thing is so you can get to know me more...and see who I was before you, was only half of who I really was meant to be and you filled in that other half."

She smiles slightly, turning her eyes up before lifting an eyebrow, "And?"

He swallows hard, shaking his head back and forth slightly avoiding the words sure to

come.

"Annnnd I kinda want to show off my kickass rocker girlfriend that could literally kick all their asses if she wanted to get back at my friends making fun of me for having to take the foreign exchange student who couldn't speak English to homecoming because it would be a 'fun' experience for her to have in America?"

She watches him and finds sincerity followed by a wash of green from the changing light.

"Good enough for me," she says turning from his hand and pushing on the gas.

He returns to his seated position, she reaches out a free hand and he reciprocates grabbing hold tightly, sweetly.

"Foreign exchange chick," she says to herself, "wow, you were a dork."
The car flows through the traffic, the orange burn now gone, given way to the clutches of an endless black night.

The door slams shut...not fully closing but good enough for Harris to leave it as is. The sidewalk is misted with a slight sheen from a light rain, reflecting the assorted lights from businesses and cars passing.

"How far is this place," Skye asks.

Looking down the street, the sight of a large, structure comes into view, Gothic in nature with the appearance of an old movie theatre, probably because that's exactly what it used to be. In its heyday The Theseus had been the premiere location for the town's high society to meet, with numerous theatres within and rooms a plenty for any level of debauchery one could desire. After a fire in the 70's shut the place down, a renovator turned the location into an event center, renting out for everything from proms to local record fairs, which is how Harris had known of the venue.

"Over there," she says, shrugging one of her shoulders in the direction as her hands were securely in her pockets.

Looking in the direction, Skye soon finds himself stupid for asking as the place was clearly the most lively spot on the street. Outside a series of red lighting had been cast, giving the Gothic accents of the building an even more intimidating view...though the oversize silver balloon arch flanked by what seemed like anything up to a hundred people impatiently waiting outside did little to keep the spooky atmosphere intact.

"I thought you said this was going to be a small reunion," Harris asks eyeing the line.

"Honestly, that's what I thought. I'm not even sure we had this many people in our class."

The line flows out the front door, which upon closer inspection is covered with the cutout of a large coffin inviting all poor souls that may wish to enter...well given there wasn't a large security guard with a clipboard standing out front blocking everyone from entering.

Walking down the line, Skye looks for any familiar faces finding nothing a plethora of far too well dressed and seemingly young ones instead.

"You are sure that it's tonight, right," Harris asks him.

Skye goes to open his mouth but a voice interrupts him.

"Meat?!" a voice from the mob shouts out.

Skye turns to Harris, a look of unexpected annoyance on his face, "yeah, it is definitely the right night."

The crowd of people separate as a large mountain of a man comes through, a giant smile upon his face almost distracts from the fact that he's wearing what looks like a well-tattered and mended letterman's jacket...keyword on "almost."

"Is that really you," the mountain asks.

"Hey there, Glen," Skye responds defeated uncovered.

"Little buddy!"

The burst of excitement is followed by a swooping hugging motion, so fast Harris is caught off guard as her boyfriend is hoisted multiple feet into the air helpless to prevent his abduction.

"Bro, it is beyond good to see you," Glen exclaims.

"Right back at you," Skye forces out with what little breath he can manage, "may I introduce my girlfriend Harris"

At the mention of her, Glen releases Skye, not being courteous enough lower him the few feet back down to the ground before dropping him. He is however courteous enough to turn to Harris and extend his hand, she shakes it and meets his smile with one of her own.

"It is a pleasure to meet you" he adds to the shake, "heard a lot about you at the last meet-up a few years ago. Glad to see you haven't gone and broken our dear Meat here just yet."

"Oh no," she smirks making sure to have a vigorous shake to match the large man's, "he's already well broken mentally and physically already."

Glen gives a deep and hearty laugh, throwing off the handshake and moving for a

quick hug. Harris feels enveloped and worried she'll have to punch her way out before he lets go.

"Sorry, don't know my own strength sometimes."

Harris shakes it off, not wanting her surprise to be taken as anger but Glen has already turned and slapped a hand onto Skye's shoulder, who unfortunately had just found his footing again from his fall before having the behemoth's hand come slapping down on him.

"Come on," Glen starts, "let's move this party inside."

Skye goes to look at Harris but is pulled away, being led by the much larger, stronger man.

The trio make their way through the crowd into an alley just adjacent to the old theatre. Not many of the anxious patrons even noticed as the three slip into the shadows and start down the long stretch of brick and glass.

"I gotta say, I'm really glad you were able to make it this year," Glen says before leaning in to try and unsuccessfully whisper to Skye, "I really like her."

Skye looks back at Harris to see if she heard the compliment, he assumes she did as she gives him a smile and an eye roll.

"So 'Meat' huh," Harris interjects, "What's that about, Glen?"

"Oh, he's never told you," Glen asks turning to walk backwards to face her.

"I don't believe he's remembered to," she responds with a smile.

Glen stops walking, reaching back to grab hold of Skye to pull him back from escaping and turning him around.

"Well as you may have noticed, our little Skye is...well," Glen starts gaining an agreeing nod from Harris, "and that lead to quite a bit of bullying from some of our upperclassmen."

Harris looks over to Skye, who is riding the fine line between this being fun reminiscing and the worst moment ever.

"So some particularly dickheadish Seniors took to calling him 'Fresh Meat' and then 'Dead Meat' and then some less than clever ones like 'Stink Meat.'"

"Flattering," she interjects with a smile.

"Being the epitome of human excellence I am," Glen says making sure to puff out his chest as far as possible, "I've always been pretty intimidating and I stood up for my little

buddy and sure enough the name calling stopped...except..."

"Except what," Harris acts watching Skye slowly slip over that line into worst moment ever.

"Except before one meet our first string 103 got sick and the only one that could come close to making that weight was Skye here, who at the time had gone missing," Glen says reaching into his pocket to find his phone, pulling it out and flipping open to answer, "Yeah, we're almost there just meet us by the door."

Glen sticks the phone back in his pocket before returning his attention to the story at hand.

"So everyone is looking for him because if we don't find him we're going to lose out on that match."

"And I'm guessing you found him?"

"Oh I didn't," he says smiling toward Skye, "one of the upperclassmen found him in a bathroom on a different wing in the middle of a little self adulation."

Harris turns to Skye with increasingly judging eyes, "You didn't."

Skye tries to look everywhere but the eyes of his girlfriend, finding it increasingly difficult.

"After that, no matter how intimidating I was there was no downplaying the 'Beat the Meat' jeers but little hairy-palms here actually ended up turning around and became a pretty decent grappler by the end of the season...not that they were going to give up such a perfect nickname."

Glen gives a deep guffaw turning to walk toward the door to the theatre, giving it a bang to match his laugh. Harris watches Skye for a moment, looking for any response. Skye looks at her, goes to speak but stops, opting instead to point in the most commanding way he can muster, "Not a word!"

Harris starts to respond but instead opts to lift her fingers to her lips, locking her comments inside for later use surely. The pair follow Glen to the door, just as the old stage door pushes open flooding the dark alley with light.

Glen holds the door open and Skye goes inside. Harris starts to enter but looks back down the alley causing her to stop for a moment.

Far down near the end of the alley there is a dark silhouette of a figure, standing dead center. She looks at the shadow for a moment and finds the longer she does the more uneasy it makes her.

Glen's focus had been on the inside of the theatre, the sound of chatter and talk can be

heard within but he notices that Harris has actually walked away from the door.

Following her eye line he sees the figure in shadow as well, standing motionless at the end of the alley.

"Hold this for a moment," Glen says to Harris.

His voice pulls her away from the shape bringing her to keep the door from closing on them as he walks past her in the direction of the figure.

"Gotta go round front," Glen shouts down the alley, the figure remains motionless and he watches for any sense of a response but the lack just causes him to get angry, "or I can come down there and beat your ass if you'd rather do that?"

The figure stands there, no response at all, just staring at them. Harris stands by the door but can still feel the stranger's gaze. Glen takes a step in its direction but as soon as he does, the shadow turns and heads back out of the alley and disappears into the crowd. Glen watches until he's sure it's gone before turning to Harris and grabbing the door.

"Fucking weirdo," he says to Harris.

For the first time since they've met, Harris doesn't feel the strong, deep tone in Glen's voice. She senses a cold, chilled almost terrified tone, only knowing it because she too feels it.

"Yeah," she searches for a clever response but can only repeat, "fucking weirdo."

"Come on," he nods his head towards inside, "let's get in where it's warm."

Harris nods agreeing, starting to walk inside but not without one quick glance down the alleyway just before the large metal door slams behind them.

Chapter 2

The Theseus possessed a charm that modern theatre's had given up decades ago in exchanged for mass audiences and gimmick popcorn buckets to earn an extra couple bucks. There was something special to this place, even beyond the sordid past it carried through its hallways, flowing through it like veins to the heart. When the place was gutted by the fire of '74, the city had voted unanimously to help restore it but after a decade the taxpayers believed their hard-earned money could be put toward something a bit more appealing than another "Haven of Sin" for the higher ups in the community. That particular nomenclature was made infamous by a local religious organization, once finding its way spray-painted across the marquee not some two weeks after it first ran in the local paper.

The building had sat untouched for a few years until it was bought by an out of townner, who happened to have much interest in restoring old historical sites. With little interest for the depraved history of the theatre or any of the nicknames it had garnered over the years, they set to work to create a marvel that many in the town hoped would overshadow and put an end to all the gossip. Three years after the purchase, the Theseus would open for special premieres and as a recreational hall. Taking full advantage of all the space, the investor believed it best to make the facilities able to hold any number of events from movies to live bands and on this particular night, a themed Halloween party.

Harris had to trust Glen knew his way through the labyrinth of service hallways as she couldn't see past him, only catching glances down long hallways as they'd pass through a junction. Down one she caught the eye of a number of wait staff that seemed to be preparing for the evening, loading trays of food. The urge to slip away to grab a few hor d'oeuvres pulled at her for a moment but the realization that once she lost her guide, she may never find her way out satiated her stomach...temporarily at least.

"You're going to love this place," Glen calls back over his shoulder, "I mean yeah it is covered in lame vampire shit right now but that doesn't stop it from still being a really cool venue."

"Yeah, I've been trying to get out here to check out one of their monthly shows."

"Rocky?"

"Eh, more like their double features," she responds, "They showed 'D.G.C.' and 'Scoop' the other weekend but I was working and couldn't making?"

"D.G.C.," Glen says inquisitively, "is that the one with the..."

"Demonic Ghost Clowns," Harris interjects, "yeah that's it."

"Oh sick, I love that one. I knew I'd like you," he says reaching back his hand for a fistbump without even looking.

Harris looks it for a moment before balling up her fist and giving it a reciprocal bump as they're walking as he pulls his hand back, she even cracks a smile. She found herself thinking that maybe this wouldn't be such a bad night after all, a thought that was interrupted by the slamming of a metal bar being pushed into the door in front of Glen and opening up to a lobby.

The lobby showed relatively little wear and tear from the many years of operation with no sign of obvious reconstruction from the fire of '74. Mesmerizing patterns flowed down the walls, giving the long corridor a modern twist on the nostalgic bones of years past. Far down the stretching carpet, Harris could see the doors to the outside, faces pressed against waiting for the official opening of the event. She thought it strange that with such a reputation, so many would not only attend but be clamouring at the opportunity.

"HARRIS," a voice calls out from the other direction.

She turns to see Skye surrounded by a group of faces she semi-recognized from old yearbook photos and a couple weeks of diligent online stalking in hopes to seem that she had some recollection of who his friends may be today. Glen was already making his way toward the group stationed around the old concessions area, now repurposed to distribute upcoming event info and on this night hold a number of trinkets and props from the "Unbeaten Hearts" movie saga. Harris shot one more look over her shoulder toward the main doors before following Glen.

"So they're not real right," the question comes from one of the girls, her face pressed against the glass pointing at the lines of fanged teeth sitting in the case.

"They're as real as fake vampire teeth can be, Honey," the guy behind her retorts bringing the girl up from the case to face him, her face not one of too much amusement at his remark.

"I know they're not REAL vampire teeth, Turner," she says taking a sip from the blood-red cocktail in her hand, "don't be such an asshole."

"Don't put words in my mouth," Turner volleyed back, "if I was going to call you stupid..."

"You really think the next words out of your mouth are going to be so elegant that I forget you using 'you' and 'stupid' right next to each other," she says with a slight turn of her head.

Harris remembered the name Turner, which brought her assumption that the girl must be Caroline. High school sweethearts turned college romantics turned married couple that seemed to have been the only ones from Skye's high school that made it out together. They didn't look nearly as stuck up as she guessed, though the more casual party clothing did far more for them than the weirdly orchestrated pictures of them with their three kids on a beach, all dressed in matching completely white outfits. She had been unsure if this was some kind of strange photoshoot or their audition to be on of those family photos that come with the frame, the ones she always felt so bad for throwing away because they looked so perfect and yet didn't want to keep it because somewhere behind their dead eyes you could sense all the terrible things they'd done in their past to get to the fame of photo frame family status. Thankfully though, neither Turner or Caroline seemed to have those dead eyes tonight. In fact, Harris thought they made quite the cute couple, with just the perfect balance bit of spite towards one another but understandable after nearly a decade and a half with one another.

“Rae,” Turner says turning away from Caroline with an aura of surrender in his body language, “you can’t honestly tell me that you went as far as to actually get real fake fangs from that god awful movie just for tonight.”

Rae. The name jerks Harris’ attention in the direction Turner was facing. The only person that had been near impossible to cyber-stalk given their lack of online presence and yet the person she was most curious to know more about...well more than just what Skye had told her over the years. In the beginning it had bothered her, hearing so much about this best friend that Skye had been interested in for most of his high school career. Every story between them had been told a couple of times over, including how they’d met when Rae had accused him of stealing their chair, only to punch him in the shoulder before realizing that the chair had actually been broken the class earlier and a replacement hadn’t been brought yet. Harris always thought it was such a weird start for a friendship, let alone such a heavy crush on his part and one that would carry for a number of years until they seemed to grow distant, likely from the literal distance between them.

Jealousy wasn’t really a common thing for Harris, always adopting the idea that if someone she was with wanted to be with someone else, then she didn’t want to be with them and yet she couldn’t help but feel a twinge every time Rae was brought up. Of course Skye was allowed to have friends beyond her, even one’s he had feelings for in the past...it was just a worry that maybe he would realize this fear of missing out and she would just go back to being that weird girl at the record store that he’d happened to come across that one day asking about some stupid band she’d never heard of.

Harris wasn’t sure what she expected meeting Rae but they weren’t exactly what she had envisioned, perhaps because the old yearbooks and stories painted a picture of a different Rae. Gone were the long blond locks, replaced with a silver-dyed undercut.

“No, of course not, Turner,” Rae says putting a matter of fact in their voice, “I already had them before tonight.”

“See,” Caroline interjects, slapping the back of her hand against Turner’s chest, “told you they were real.”

“If you’re excited about that, just wait for a little later,” Rae says taking a drink, “we’ve actually got a very special...”

Rae’s eyes seem to wander from Caroline to the rest of the group, stopping with they come across something that doesn’t exactly fit with everything else.

“Hi, whatsup,” Rae says directly in Harris’ direction with less of a ‘whatsup’ vibe and more liken to ‘who the hell are you?’

The change of topic pulls everyone’s attention to Harris, who doesn’t seem to realize that they were all looking her way a little longer than it should have.

“Hi,” Harris responds, “sorry sometimes I forget that other people can see me.”

“Oh I’m so sorry,” Skye stutters through, “Everyone this is Harris, my amazing and definitely not invisible girlfriend.”

Glen places a hand on Harris’ shoulder, “We had a little bit of a talk, she seems pretty cool,” looking to Harris, “I can totally vouch for her.”

Skye reaches across her shoulder and pushes Glen's mitt of a hand off and replaces it with his own, giving him the closest thing he can muster to a tough guy glare that he can...which comes off more as the type of face one would make when they're confused by a math question than anything else.

"I'm pretty sure I can vouch for my own girlfriend, Glen."

"Actually you can't" interrupts Rae.

Skye looks to Rae, now with an actual confused look on his face...he's far better at those.

"Sorry, kiddo," Rae says walking through the group towards the pair, "those are the rules."

"What rules?"

"The rules that someone not in the group can't vouch for someone else in the group," Rae responds.

"Since when am I not part of the group?!"

"Well let's see," Rae contemplates with a finger taping their lip for good measure, "how about your lame ass hasn't been around in what is it...five years is it?"

"Come on," Skye tries to explain, "you know it isn't like that."

"How about the fact you didn't come to any of our kids baptisms," Turner asks.

"What, don't you start now, besides did you even get any of your kids baptised?"

Caroline steps in front of Turner, a scowl on her face.

"No, we didn't, Skye," she says in a deadpan disappointed mom voice, "but a real friend would know that and not have to ask."

"I meaaaaann..." Glen perks up, "they kinda have a point."

"Oh this is ridiculous," Skye says throwing his hands up.

"Them the rules," Rae says walking over and putting an arm around Harris, walking her towards the middle of the group, "I hear the line is only three quarters around the building, sure if you get in line you can get in for last call."

"Okay, I get it, funny joke," Skye says defeated.

Rae turns around bring Harris with them to face Skye.

"Only way I can really see you getting back into the group is to be vouched back in."

"Fine, whatever. So vouch me back in."

“I’m sorry, I’ve just seen too much, I can’t with a clear conscience,” Rae says turning to look at Harris, “What about you, new fish, what do you think?”

Harris meets Rae’s look, matching the creeping smile forming on their face as well. Turning to look at Skye, she looks him over, examining him as if for the first time.

“I think he has...,” turning to Rae, “potential. I say let him in.”

Rae throws up their hands, “new fish has spoken,” walking to Skye they embrace him, “welcome to the club, kiddo.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“Say as his initiation,” Harris speaks up, “he go get me a drink, anyone else need one?”

“Fantastic idea,” Rae adds, “pick us up some drinks and make it snappy,” adding in a hair rustling to Skye before walking over to Harris and extending their hand, “truly nice to meet you, Harris.”

After all the stories, all the tales, all the little quips and attempts to explain the inside jokes, Harris could see why Skye had been so into Rae. It certainly wasn’t hard to feel magnetized to their personality, she’d only known them a couple of minutes and had already developed a bit of a crush herself. She wasn’t sure if this was better or worse but figured to ignore it and just try to enjoy the night.

“You too, Rae,” Harris says shaking their hand, “certainly have heard a lot about you.”

“How about me,” asks Turner trying to bring himself into the moment.

“Maybe,” Harris says thinking it over, “are you the one that got duct-taped to the ceiling of the locker room?”

Turner goes back to looking at the case of movie props, ignoring the look on Caroline’s face searching for more information.

“So what was that surprise then, Rae,” Caroline asks turning from Turner.

“OH,” they exclaim climbing up on top of the case to sit, “so get the parental unit was doing an adjustment a few months ago and drove up to do it right, so while he is there he’s checking out some of the other offices, offering estimates and whatever and comes across this agent who worked in the same office, Christian something another-”

“We gonna hit the point before New Year’s, Rae,” Glen asks draining his second beer of the conversation.

“Nothing for flair then,” Rae directs to Glen before returning to the story, “anyways turns out the agent has a certain client who was looking for work and is going to do an appearance at none other than this party.”

Rae waits for the excitement but is instead met with blank stares.

“Its Jake Dove!”

“Who,” the first response coming from Glen.

Caroline is over-boiling with excitement, grabbing at her husband’s coat trying to figuratively and literally drag him back into the conversation. Harris gives the inside of her pockets a good once over, sighing at the realization that this party was likely going to be even louder and more annoying than she originally expected.

“How can you even say that, you big oaf,” Caroline yells at Glen, grabbing the olive from Turner’s martini to throw at him, “he’s only the star of ‘Unbeaten Hearts’ 1, 2, and 3...and voiced the audiobook version before joining that celebrity dancing show.”

“Did he do that weird indie movie where he was like the secret clone of Hitler or something,” asks Turner.

“Yeah but it was pretty much a favor to the director after doing that satanic band movie,” Rae clarified.

Skye comes up beside Harris, giving her a kiss on the side of the head before handing her the drink he’d retrieved, closest he could find to her favorite, choosing the themed drink that had ‘whiskey’ in the ingredients.

“What’d I miss,” he whispers to her.

“Oh, uhh secret satanic dancing hitler is coming to the party as a special guest.”

Skye nearly spits out his drink, “Jake Dove is here?!”

“Why do you know that,” she asks before waving it off to drink and rejoin the group’s conversation.

Rae has their phone out, texting while talking to the others.

“...my dad is out there in the parking lot right now waiting to escort him in,” they finish.

“How about we head in, looks like they’re going to be opening up soon,” Glen points out, directing the group to look down the lobby where security has gathered by the doors preparing to open.

“Sounds like a plan,” Rae says spinning around on the counter, “first one in gets to group Jake!”

Before Rae can even get down from the other side of the counter, Caroline has run past the others, entering into the main hall. No one moves for a moment, instead turning to Turner.

“She knows you’re joking, right,” he says turning to Rae, “you are joking right?”

Rae gives him a bit of an open to interpretation look, one that Turner decides he give follow and make sure his beautiful wife of seven years doesn’t get seduced by a teen vampire in his mid-40’s. The rest of the group gives follow from the concession area as the security guards start patting down the first patrons at the doors.

Outside the wind starts to pick up, the sun as fully sunk into the distance. A fresh shimmer of rain reflects the neon and lights from the streets. Just as he had been for the better part of the last hour, Charlie found himself walking through the first couple rows of cars. Sucking down the last bit of his cigarette, he watches the flame burn bright one last time before throwing it aside. Jostling the pack in his coat pocket he feels a couple more but if he didn't get inside soon, he'd freeze to death or die of smoke inhalation.

There wasn't much to do out here besides wait. All the guests were waiting around the front and no one was apparently smart enough to try sneaking through the employee parking entrance. So here he stood, bundled up and hoping that this idiot would hurry up. Personally he thought it was a bit dumb to drop that much on an appearance fee for a washed up teen heartthrob but the kid wanted him, so he was happy to do what he could to make their birthday perfect or as perfect as he could. It'd been a rough year for both of them and sometimes things of the "bit dumb" variety are the best distractions. Besides, he'd already thrown more money into this party than just about all the kiddie parties combined, what would it matter if a couple thousand more went along as well. As long as the kid was happy.

Inside his jacket pocket, his phone gives off a buzz. Reaching a hand in, he pulls it out, illuminating the screen and nearly blinding himself. He holds it a bit further away from his face this time, making out a text from Rae.

"Headed in, they're opening. Any new?"

The text doesn't leave a lot of room to bullshit them. Going to respond he finds his gloves not optimal, while leather with silver inlay seemed nice on the site, they'd proven more difficult in everyday life, especially when trying to text his kid. He loved them but honestly, he could have just done for a call. Pulling a glove off with his teeth by the fingers, he starts typing only to get interrupted with a call.

The caller ID reads "JACK DOVE."

He tries to answer but before he can the ringing stops. Tired of waiting he abandons the text and hits redial. The line rings once, then second, but on the third Charlie pulls the phone away and listens. Had there been any more noise than the light sound of the wind in the trees, he may have missed it. Somewhere out in the line of cars there was the smallest inkling of music.

"Hello," he shouts to no answer.

He hangs up the phone and notices that the music ends as well. A peculiar coincidence at first, he decides it is worth trying again. Pressing redial once again, the line begins to ring and with it the slight tone of music fills the silent air once more.

Charlie begins walking in the directions of the tone, no longer paying attention to the phone in his hand. Each step it gets louder, each step it grows near. He swears to everything holy that if this fucking primadonna has had him standing in the cold, he'd beat that pretty perfectly asymmetrical face of his into a whole new shape.

Nearly the end of the cars and the back of the parking lot, he finds the limo, the limo that the song seems to be coming from...until suddenly it stops and Charlie once again finds himself alone in the silent air.

Looking down at his phone he checks it but it hasn't dropped the call or gone to voicemail. The call has connected.

"Hey, is this Jack," he asks into the phone, "I have been waiting for a hell of a long time for you, you little shit."

Charlie waits but no response comes from the other end of the line, at least nothing resembling words. Through the speaker comes a low, wet sound resembling something Charlie remembered from somewhere but couldn't place where.

"Screw this," he says cutting off the phone and putting it in his pocket and walking to the door of the limo.

The limo door open an inch when Charlie tugged on the handle before pulling back, slamming against his grasp.

"The fuck," he mutters grabbing the handle again.

The door gives again, this time a little more but once again slams closed pulling the handle from Charlie's hand. Too tired and cold to deal with this, Charlie grabs hold as tight as he can but again the handle slips beyond his control.

"Okay," he exclaims to no one as he removes his gloves throwing them to the ground, "open this door right now or I'm suing you for every fucking stupid vampire dime you have, you asshole!"

Gripping the handle with both hands, he pulls back as hard as he can. This time he's able to grip it tighter, using his foot against the side of the limo to pry it open just enough to reach his hand around the crease of the door. Just as his fingers wrap around the lip of the door, once again it slams, this time with Charlie's hand secured in the door.

His screams are deafening, he can't remember the last time he was in this much pain. Losing track of all the words he thinks he's trying to say, Charlie starts pounding against the hood, demanding, pleading, and ultimately begging that they open the door. Just as he lands one final defeated slam on the hood the door rocks him backward, the force so strong that he collapses to the ground.

Charlie looks at his hand, his fingers are hanging lifelessly at the end of the mangled stump that used to be his hand. Try as hard as he can, he can only twitch the remnants of his ring finger, the bone flashing through the tattered bits of skin and muscle. He tries to get angry but no fire follows, he tries to yell but no words follow. He looks up to the door, it is slowly opening to him now, as if all he had to do was ask.

It is at this point that Charlie remembers where he recognized that noise, the low, wet sound, slapping and squirting. He hadn't been able to place it before but now it was far easier. He'd spent a summer in college working for a local butcher shop to earn a little extra money. That low, wet grinding, it'd been the same noise he'd heard every day while he would make the ground meat in the back. He couldn't tell why he'd forgotten that noise, he'd dreamt about it for weeks after he'd left and yet now it'd come back as clear as day...now that he had the visual to match the noise.

The inside of the limo had once been some shade of teal, perhaps a nice aqua with lighted accents all along the seats. Now however all that remained was different shades of red. Every inch of teal aqua had been tainted, stained with a paint store's worth of crimson color schemes. It wasn't that colors that froze Charlie or brought him back to his good ole' college days. It was the strips of meat, chunks, visceral and gore spattered across the opening.

He's not sure how long it takes for his brain to wake up the plethora of angry demands to run but finally he finds himself pulling himself along the asphalt, running into a car and dragging himself upward. He can't take his eyes away from the massacre inside the back of the limo. His hand claws into his pocket, pulling forth his phone, and goes to dial but blinds himself once again. Again the alerts start, every cell screaming to run, to hide, to get help, blinded he turns to run finally but stops.

The shadow stayed still in front of him. Had Charlie not run into it, he would have been sure it wasn't even real yet here it was, solid, large, and towering over him. Charlie wants to ask for help, to ask anything. His vision slowly adjusted to the darkness. The shadow starts to gain shapes, definition. Charlie feels like he must be talking but he can't make out what words are coming out of his own mouth. Then he realizes the shadow is speaking, low, but speaking.

Charlie forces himself to focus, blinking his eyes and forcing out all other noise. He can see the shadow's mouth moving.

"I'm sorry," Charlie says, for the first time hearing the terror in his own voice, "what are you saying?"

The shadow leans forward, the lights of a car momentarily illuminate the pair and Charlie sees two black circular sunglasses lense staring at him. He tried to wonder in that moment why the man would be wearing sunglasses at night but instead found himself questioning why his mouth had been in the form of a dark smile in that passing light.

"His name.." the shadow clarified drawing Charlie in closer, "is Jake."

Charlie's mouth begins to form some kind of shape, possibly one to ask what or who, or any thousands of possibilities that could have been expressed but before any sound could follow he is jerked, impossibly quick and violently into the limo with the door slamming behind him.

The shadow watches before dissipating back into the darkness once more.

The hall had filled faster than Harris had expected. Before long she lost track all the other members of her new group, save for Skye but he had little chance to escape. Save for the time going to get their drinks, he'd been by her side most of the time, a fact she wasn't sure if she fully approved or not. On one hand she liked the company, over time it'd become easier for her to fade into the crowd. Over the years, she learned to walk amongst everyone, invisible to mostly everyone but since she met Skye...well, she'd also come to appreciate being seen for once, by him at least.

“Everything okay,” he asks in his way that he knows something up but wants to give her space, usually accompanied with a squeeze of her hand that also told her that if she didn’t want to talk, it was okay but just to know he’s there with her.

“Yeah, everything is cool,” she responds completely showing her hand in four little words.

They’d taken up a temporary residency to the farthest wall from the stage, halfway between an oversized balloon archway in the shape of a giant vampire’s head, fangs and all, and the enclosed dj station where a particularly bored looking dj could be seen through his little viewing window currently flipping through a stack of records. While not the most hopping spot in the party, it was a safe distance from the dance floor without being too far to bring others to come drag loners into the amorphous blob’s giant, sweaty tendrils to do yet another slide or cha cha in rhythm with all the other body snatched drones.

“I’m gonna see if I can get some better music playing,” she says, her hands instinctively finding their way towards her jacket pockets, “you have any request, Sinatra?”

Attempting to walk away, Skye turns to match, hooking an arm around her’s and swinging her playfully back to him and even with every part of her telling her to just go hide away in the lobby and steal drinks off unsuspecting attendees, she can’t resist but come back to him.

“Come on,” he says softly, or as softly as one can say over the beat of a dance floor, “they weren’t that bad were they.”

“No,” she turns to him, smiling best she can to hide the uneasy, “they were great, everyone was great.”

“Then what’s up with the new mopey mode?”

“Skye,” she says giving him a look of disbelief, “we’re at a party themed for a bunch of nearly 30’s going on pre-teen status with watered down drinks, shitty alt-rock, and I’m pretty sure if I hear another lameass Southern vampire accent I’m going to start ripping out fangs and shoving them up their-”

“OKAY okay,” he says throwing up hands in defeat, “I get it, the party sucks.”

She gives him a death glare, “if that is a vampire pun, I’m going to kill you.”

“No,” he tries to say through laughing, “completely unintentional.”

“I do mean literally, like make it look like an accident literal,” she says passing him headed toward the dj booth again, “can I go request some music now?”

Skye doesn’t stop her, he lets her get a couple steps, fighting his own mouth from speaking but he ultimately loses.

“And Rae?”

She turns back to him, his face one sheepishly waiting for what is to follow, unsure of which Harris he may get. Deciding that he’s at his cutest when awaiting true unknown terror, she lets him sweat a second. She thinks it over and over, and once more for good measure.

‘Come on, Harris!’

She cocks her eyebrow a bit, smiling at his impatience, “they’re cool, I get why you’d two would hit it off,” turning she heads toward the booth, glad that his smile tells her that he’s glad she approves of his best friend...which causes her inability to keep her mouth shut and turning back with, “just be glad you two never dated.”

Sky perks his head up at her, shouting as she gets farther away, “why’s that?!”

“They’d eaten you alive,” she says with a devilish smile before turning to head through the crowd.

The crowd was relatively calm given the number of people in the hall, something she’d worried about the whole week leading up to the event. She’d gone as far as to check the restrictions on the hall by the fire marshal, a number that she’d worried she’d end up getting obsessed with and stressing about every square inch being filled with bodies...but now that she was here, it wasn’t as bad as she’d thought. It was still bad but a bad she could manage. Pushing through a curtain of meat-filled bodies occasionally was much preferable over getting buried in a wave of them.

The DJ booth was elevated above the crowd, which made it easier to find but also a bit harder to reach but she’d always enjoyed a challenge. They’d set it up in the corner of the room, completely against both walls with no way of escape but forward. Sizing up her options she decided to try her luck on the far side of the booth, figuring that even a sliver of opening could give her a chance to speak with the guy and after squeezing through a group of girls dancing, ducking an already far too drunk guy’s wildly flailing arm, and conveniently ignoring a taped piece of paper on the side of the booth that had “EMPLOYEES ONLY” scribbled across it, she’d found her way.

Approaching slowly, she wanted to make the guy aware of her presence without scaring him over the edge and into an impromptu crowd surfing incident. Luckily it didn’t take him long to notice, a feat she found impressive given his ridiculous outfit covered in what appeared to be Christmas lights, a row of glow bracelets up his arms, and what she was suspiciously sure was a Lite Brite with the letters G-A-V sloppily written being worn as an oversized necklace.

“I told the other ones,” he says annoyingly avoiding her gaze, “I’ll get around the playing the Unbeaten Hearts soundtrack later.”

“Ugh.”

She hadn’t realized that her disgust had been audible, let alone loud enough for him to have heard her but now she had his undivided attention and he was looking her over.

“Who are you, don’t look like those other dorks,” he says reaching her eyes, “yeah, you’re a totally different type of dork.”

She feels a surge of insult and wants to fire back with an insult, maybe something accusing him of falling through a children’s Christmas display on the way here but she realizes that from his tone, ‘dork’ wasn’t meant as an insult, or at least one he meant maliciously.

“Yeah, no” she tries to explain, “ not one of those dorks. Just looking for some music that’s not so...”

“Bubble gum pop-rock?”

“Please,” she says with a sigh of relief, “ can you help me out?”

“And what,” he points to her shirt, “play some Disrespectre or something?”

“That’d be amazing,” she says a bit too excited, toning back down to try and keep her cover as one of the cooler dorks.

“Psssh,” he says turning back to the table, “and that’d be my job.”

He grabs a piece of paper a couple pages long and holds it up for her.

“Gotta stick to the script,” he says before throwing the trash across the small room.

She goes to leave, “thanks anyways.”

“Hey, dork,” he calls stopping her, “I’ll see what I can do.”

She brightens in that moment to a level that worries him.

“NOT Disrespectre...but I’ll see if I can find something for you.”

“You’re awesome, man,” she calls as she runs out of the room.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says turning to the laptop on his table before turning back to yell, “and tell everyone else to read the fucking sign!”

They’d assembled in the parking lot, by this point there were nearly 30 of them. All different and yet all the same in a dark, mysterious way. Some dressed in all black, other’s going for more color to match the recent trends. That always made hunting easier but also made it harder to hide. Tonight there would be no need to hide.

Through the pack of them, the blonde walked and no one stopped her, parting without thought or consideration. They moved as if by force of nothing more than her presence.

The temperature had dropped significantly since sundown. In the distance the slapping of a flag being ripped to and fro by the wind was all that could be heard. The building, The Theseus stood before them, just as quiet on the outside, with only the faint beat of music coming from inside. The old theatre had been built for many reasons, most of all to keep things in and with very thick walls, something they were banking on tonight.

In front of them all stood one figure, one shadow. His long black coat hid him against the darkness but standing before the building, overlooking his battlefield to be, it did very little to hide his considerable

frame. He stood taller than them all, not always a sign of strength with their kind but for him...it certainly was.

She got closer than any of the others dared. Most found him a bit, intimidating in this state, his dead silence, his dead eyes hid behind those rounded glasses of his. She respected the fear she had for him but would also not bow to it, she knew exactly how close she could get before she was no longer welcomed. Tonight she rode that line as close as possible. Tonight was special.

“They’re ready,” she speaks calmly, “just say the word.”

He doesn’t move, doesn’t flinch. In that moment, his army stands still, poised for any sign of battle.

He breathes deep, releasing it in a long sigh. A pointless task given the circumstances, now nothing more than a habit from before brought over to his new being but one that he still enjoys from time to time still.

She turns back to the horde behind her, pace quickening with each step.

“Take the chains to the others, let them know we’re ready,” the sea parts again for her, closing back in on itself as she passes, “bring the boy.”

“There you are,” Skye calls out to her, “what took you so long?”

Harris pushes through the last few people chit-chatting in the middle of her way to reach her boyfriend. She looks both better and worse than when she left him, less wanting to leave but tired from crawling through the hordes.

“Got a bit turned around but all’s good in the neighborhood, Roger.”

He gives her a look, furrowing her brow, “well I’m glad you’re in a good enough to make lame dad jokes.”

“Aww, that’s sweet,” she says cozing up to him, “or are you just looking for an excuse to call me Papi, tonight?”

“Uhhh,” Skye struggles to find words as he’s actually surprised at the turn around, “can it be both?”

Harris starts to answer just as a new song starts playing over the speakers and immediately distracts her. She’d listenend to the band Phantoms all throughout high school, a fact that she wouldn’t openly admit to these days outside of The Theseus but in an endless abyss of positive feel good so-called rock, she could go for some emo-edge goodness and that was definitely Phantoms.

“Is that...Phantoms,” Skye asks scrunching up his nose at the song but is jerked off his high pedestal when Harris grabs him around the collar and starts dragging him into the dance floor.

Skye feigns resistance but he'd follow her anywhere, even if that was into an ocean of sweaty vampers. He wasn't sure what tonight was going to be like but as he watched the tied-up part of her hair bounce up as she lead him deeper in, everything else a blurry, smokey haze, colors bleeding into each other...he knew there was nowhere he'd rather be than here with her.

Finally stopping somewhere far behind enemy lines, Harris found herself far deeper than she'd ever expected going but turning back to meet Skye all her fears washed away...besides, the fear that he was going to walk right over her as she hadn't exactly given him much warning before stopping.

She'd always wondered what it'd been like if they'd gone to school together. Maybe they'd been friends, enemies, somewhere in-between but she knew it was likely that they'd never even talked. Skye denied his jock status but Harris would have avoided him, but here, tonight she had her jock and he had his weird, extraterrestrial or whatever she was. It was easy to get lost in him within this music, bringing her back to all those memories but now he was here.

The dance floor flowed into itself, moving with the music and finding a balance in the soundwaves. The hall hadn't handled this many patrons in a very long time and the night was just starting off. There were over a forty-three different light rigs set up around the room, twenty-two total speakers, lead by the main four on the side of the stage, two industry-level smoke machines, and a rather mesmerizing laser grid projecting over the crowd. Not only did these make for one of the most killer parties many of the attendees had ever heard of, let alone actually attended, but it also made it very easy for the shadows to move in.

They started at the main doors to the hall, moving effortlessly through the flashing lights and gyrating dancers. Why would anyone question them, even if they had been noticed but they never were. Slowly they stalked around the edges of the dance floor, fighting instinct and instead forcing to stay pressed against the walls. Every wall.

The room had started spinning about half-way through the song but Harris had decided to spin with it, a sound strategy and certainly making the feeling of getting lost easier. His face held her in the moment and part of her mind found itself trying to absorb every detail about the moment, every sight, smell, every little insignificant edge because when she looked back later, those would be the ones that mattered the most. Running her hand across his face, she can feel her mouth smiling wide, wider than she can remember all night, surely wearing a big dumb grin...then her gaze wandered.

It hadn't been much of a wander, only an inch from his eyes, the little spot just above his right eye, her favorite spot, but that inch caused her to lose focus on him and turn to the gap in the dance floor. It'd only been a split second but through the crowd it had been there. A figure at the edge of the floor. In the moment she'd not seen much, only two reflective surfaces, showing back the red flashing lights of the party but in that second, she'd sworn they were burning, red. A formless demon staring, watching her and just as fast as it was there, it was gone.

The distraction is enough to shake her hard, as if realizing that not only was she spinning around this dance floor but tapped into the rotation of the Earth itself, feeling the thousands of miles per hour all in a second. She fought to hold back from throwing up, instead opting to pushing away Skye and forcing her way through the crowd. Fighting the closing feeling in her chest, she fights through the rocking sea of people. Her focus was fading fast, everything becoming blobs among shapes and colors. Her shoulder

catches on something or something spinning her around and nearly tripping over her boots into the punch table just outside the mass of people.

Four in, hold four, four out, hold four, four in, hold four, four out, hold four.

She keeps repeating to herself over and over trying to find her breath, to calm her mind, slow her heart or really just stop from feeling like she was going to explode. Skye hadn't been far behind, coming out through the people soon after her. He places a hand on her back, pulling it back to see if she was okay being touched or if this had been a bad attack.

"Something-something-," she tries to speak but only repeats the same word over and over.

Skye grabs a cup from the table, scooping up some of the punch and holding it for her, just within her grasp if she wants to take it.

"You're okay," Skye tries to speak calmly but struggles with the music, "we're out."

"It-it" she grits her teeth, angry that she can't say more words.

"Just have to breath, Harris," he says next to her ear, "everything is going to be okay."

If he'd known what was to follow, he likely would have never said those words, even apologized for even uttering them to her. In that moment, the moment everything felt like it was spinning, like she was burning from inside, even as the music abruptly silenced and all the lights, and lasers, and smoke machines turned off at once, there was one thing that Harris knew that no one else on that floor knew.

Everything was not going to be okay.

Chapter 3

The room sat blanketed in darkness, still and silent, the touch of fog wafting through the air. It wasn't long before the murmurs started but all were silenced with the bright light flooded the stage. No one spoke, clapped, cheered, they could do nothing but stand in silence because there, center stage was a man that none of them recognized, none of them knew, and problem that some didn't care about. His round, black sunglasses reflecting back the lights.

Slowly the man rose the microphone in his hand to his mouth.

"Good evening."

The two words boomed throughout the speaker systems, lingering and rolling through, even as they finished the vibrations rolled through the crowd. Just two words. Two words to enthrall the entire room to him.

"Tonight, it seems we have a bit of a celebration going on," the man spoke, slowly striding to one side of the stage, his gaze floating across the audience, "and of course what better day to celebrate than today, All Hallows' Eve."

Reaching the end of the stage, he lowers the microphone, inspecting the faces around the edges below his feet.

"And what isn't there to celebrate," he speaks through a smile, a smile that comes off more uneasy than welcoming, "we all are here to eat," he holds for a moment, "to drink," pauses for another moment, "to fuck."

The word comes out long, raw, shivering through the crowd and bringing the first cheers of his time on stage. The moment the cheers come he stops dead and turns in their direction.

"Yes," he encourages the heckler, "to give into our most perverse and...primal desires. To feast on the flesh, if you will."

Slowly more of the crowd starts coming into his words, enjoying the show before them.

"Because what are we more than animals," he smiles but it bares fake, "ravenous, every one of us," holding up one finger he dots across members of the audience, "each.and.every.one.of...us."

Making his way back to center stage he watches, his gaze going beyond the crowd, "whether we are wolves or dogs," he smiles into the front row, "dolphin or octopus," his covered eyes drift to the back in Harris' direction, "lamb...or lion."

“We all have our role to play, to feast or fuck or fight or any of the other wonderous things we can do...and yet, you have chose to come here tonight.”

His gaze turns toward the giant balloon vampire off stage, the posters of “Unbeaten Hearts” surrounding.

“You choose to come worship...” he moves the mic away, searching for words but really watching, “vampires.”

It is at this point the audience is fully behind him, possibly believing this to be yet another high dollar form of entertainment of the night. He doesn’t budge to their adulation.

“You are sheep worshipping the wolves sent to devour you,” he says slightly shaking his head, “as if begging for our jaws.”

The use of ‘our’ stutters some but for more, it secures that he is nothing more than part of the show.

“But of course, only you could be so weak as to welcome your demise, to praise it, to beg for it,” with each word his jaw stiffens, the words coming out between clenched teeth, “you are so worthless that you flaunt your weakness, believing nothing can happen to you, that you are touched, blessed from such terrible endings as the ones you are meeting.”

Harris grips tight of Skye’s hand, squeezing stronger than even she realizes. He goes to say something but stops as he sees the look in her eyes, gone is the anxiety, replaced now with pure, unmitigated horror.

“But I can promise you,” the man continues, “ before this night is over, you will know your weaknesses and just how easy those blessings are broken. I have such-”

“BRING OUT JAKE DOVE ALREADY, NERD” the voice flies out from the crowd, followed by the half-empty plastic cup of some red-blood cocktail, now soaking into the man’s leather shoes and pants leg.

The silence returns, no one moves, not until he does.

“You...” he starts as he brings his eyes up from his pants leg, “want...Jake Dove?”

The cheers start as smatterings throughout, growing until the whole audience is cheering for their special guest.

“Marvelous,” the man exclaims, throwing his arm up to his side, gone is the cold, angry, replaced with that of a circus barker, “then boils and ghouls,” he begins as he backs up to the edge of the stage’s curtain, “I submit for your approval,” his hand grips tight the velvet fabric, “your one and only,” jerking back the curtain...”JAKE.DOVE.”

As the curtain pulls back, billowing across the stage, the cheers that had begun quickly die out and once again the aghast silence overtakes them. The man’s face remains the same, from the moment he looks onto his revelation, even as he strides over and picks up the same plastic up that had been thrown at him moments earlier.

With each step back towards the curtain, he shakes the red liquid from the cup, giving it a swift blow to clear any last remnants as he returns to Jake or what remained of Jake.

There standing, though standing would be a fallacy as the only reason he was upright was because he was being held up by two of the man's compatriots if you will. From wrist to chest, he had been split, the lower half of skin from his arms, dangling, veins and vessels stretched out from each arm. His chest laid open and bare, skin removed completely, muscle and bones forced back to reveal the inner cavity where his heart beat still...faintly, but still.

The man draws in the scent, breaths deep and letting the air linger inside him for a moment before letting it release with every stress that burdened him as well. Holding the cup to Jake's exposed heart, he uses his free hand to poke a single hold into the side of the heart, the muscle giving up freely all the blood that had pooled inside, filling the cup more than one would think and with it causing Jake to slump and beat his last beat.

Turning back to the front of the stage, the man walked slowly, bringing the cup to his nose, taking in the aroma of the freshly flown blood now swirling around his plastic cup. As he came to center stage, he drinks slowly, lifting the cup high, tilting his head back, feeling the viscus' flavor flowing through this fangs, draining down his throat, soaking into him.

Slowly he lowers his head, slightly licking his lips and almost realizing where he was again, surprised by what was before him. Lifting the microphone one last time, his velvet words vibrate through the audience just as his first ones, just as calm as before.

"This is where you run."