

Book One of Blood and Lust



SWEET CINNAMON
AND HONEY

A. K. Fagan

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When he had successfully assassinated the leading warlord in Inderhall, Mikhail's last idea of a reward was a vacation to the southern city of Canton in North Calgary. However, his sire had deemed it appropriate, and Mikhail knew better than to argue with the elder vampire.

He'd never liked the big cities after darkness had fallen—in fact, he'd never much liked big cities to begin with. Being a creature of solitude, he much preferred the ancient feel of a dark, quiet forest without the artificial lights and bustling men and women out to indulge in activities not meant for the daytime hours. Their debauchery disgusted him, not in the least because he felt very little inclination towards emotions such as desire and greed. His baser instincts more so involved bloodlust and the need to be in control, to be feared. In his rather unique position, these needs were easily and often fulfilled.

Humans had no idea how truly dangerous the nighttime hours were for them. Most of them remained unaware of the untimely death those like him represented because of strict statutes their corrupt governments had secretly placed on them. They were ignorant, which was certainly the best course of action to prevent a widespread panic, but also to their detriment. It was this ignorance that made hunting a much easier endeavor, and while Mikhail would never complain about that, the self-serving acts of the government—obtain power, retain power—were never something he could respect. It was all the better that he didn't and would never answer to them.

He had little regard for human life outside of the necessity of feeding, but even someone as inherently 'evil' as he could understand that offering up the lives of those meant to be protected just to maintain control wasn't the most ethical approach.

It was a shame his sire had sent him to a city like this, though, despite the vulnerability of its people. He would have much rather preferred to be in the wilderness, where his appearance and actions weren't dictated by the masses, and he could truly enjoy the freedom his lifestyle had attained him. The air there was clean, which mattered to him although breathing wasn't strictly necessary; any forms of life left him well enough alone; there were no trifling interruptions to his day. Instead, he had been forced to visit a polluted city where the air smelled constantly like smoke and gasoline, he was pressed on all sides by lesser beings, and even something as simple as

entering and leaving his hotel room garnered curious looks, mostly likely because of the hours he kept.

In fairness to his sire, the city of Canton was ripe with the blood of nobles and the wealthy. While the homeless and poor were easier prey, their blood was often unsatisfying and dirty, although it would do if he was desperate. He would have to be very desperate for blood indeed if he fed on a homeless man—the taste was disgusting, especially when infused with drugs and alcohol, as it often was. It was for this reason he usually chose those who could at least take care of themselves. But even more importantly, those who were privileged, who had much to live for and were full of the desire to survive, provided a much more thrilling hunt. Instilling fear within them was an experience he lived for, and the adrenaline that flowed through their veins made the result of his chase so much sweeter. With that in mind, his sire had probably thought sending him here would be a treat. And Mikhail supposed it was, in that regard, even with his previous complaints in mind.

Unfortunately for his hunting preferences, his looks did not appeal to the upper class—at least not without modification, and he rarely felt the desire to change himself to fit the needs of others. If he was so inclined, he could blend in well enough with the throngs of humans going out to their posh restaurants and VIP clubs reserved for the elite, but he found little use for that in a liberal place such as Canton, where ‘different’ was easily accepted by most.

And he did indeed look different than the average human if he chose not to hide himself. Upon turning, his previously dark eyes had become the color of freshly spilled blood and his fingernails had blackened and narrowed into tips, mirroring the appearance of claws. His skin had paled far more than was the norm to the sun-loving southerners of Canton, and he had untamable black hair that had the classic look of ‘rebel’ that so many human teenagers attempted to achieve with copious amounts of gel and hairspray. All in all, he was not what his preferred food group would find aesthetically attractive.

However, it seemed the trend these days was for the progeny of the rich to rebel against their parents, and so occasionally he could find a human who liked how he looked, had pleasing blood, and who could also be convinced into a dark alley for a deadly tête-à-tête. These were usually

found at highly sexualized nightclubs, often where kink parties and a great deal of partial nudity took place. Although he detested such whims, they served his purposes and he would not protest.

It was at one of these places—a BDSM club with a twist of gothic culture ironically titled ‘The Virgin Saint’—that he had decided to make his hunting ground for the night. It hadn’t been difficult to procure attire appropriate for the occasion—form-fitting black jeans, a sleeveless black shirt, and a dark leather jacket, with cliché combat boots completing his ensemble. He cared little for his appearance, but it was necessary to ‘fit in’ when hunting in a place like this.

The bouncer at the door gave Mikhail little trouble, barely glancing at him before returning the ID with a fake name. Because of the burly man’s inattention, Mikhail was easily able to cast a small glamour to trick the bouncer into believing he had paid for his entry. Money had never been a concern, but where one could avoid spending it, one should. If he spent money every time he had to eat like a human did, he would drain resources much faster than necessary.

The Virgin Saint was dimly lit, like most nightclubs, but he could see just fine with the vampiric gift of perfect night vision. The club had two bars on opposite sides of the large room, one by the stage where an electronica band was setting up for their performance and the other near the entrance to the patio. Purple and red strobe lights flashed erratically on the dance floor, but the main source of light was from the electric candelabras attached seemingly without rhyme or reason to the walls around the room. The floor and walls were black, with the only tinge of color coming from the white trimming lining the ceiling, yellowed with age.

The scent of cigarette smoke was pungent, even from the distance he was from the patio, and it was only barely masked by the stagnant, humid air inside the bar. Admittedly, the smell of sweat and emotion around the room was strong, but he could handle it well enough. If he had been a fledgling, the thick, tempting smell of blood from so many humans and the thrumming of loud music would have been overwhelming, but he had not been a fledgling in a very long time and was accustomed to his heightened senses. It was now easy to assimilate into the crowd seamlessly without succumbing to bloodlust, even though the club was packed to capacity, and as he pushed his

way through the crowd, he decided he could not have chosen a better place to hunt on a Saturday night.

He took a seat at the bar near the patio, simply observing the gaudily-dressed patrons with mild interest. He had to choose a target carefully, preferably one that was desiring attention from a handsome stranger and who had either come alone or with a large group of friends—either way, they had to be someone who wouldn't be missed for a while. He was eyeing a woman in her mid-thirties sitting across from him down the bar when he was suddenly assaulted with a scent that sent a surge of craving through his body, as though his hunger had at once tripled in intensity, and this hunger would only be sated by the blood from whoever the scent belonged to.

He was immediately alert. Throughout the din of laughing, chattering, and boisterous exclamations, the scent of whomever this human was called out to him. It was the sweetest, most delectable scent that he had ever had the joy of inhaling. He'd never felt blood call out to him like this before, not in all his three-hundred and forty-six years. It was an overwhelming temptation to immediately find this person and drain them of all their blood—this was something he had never felt before and didn't rightly imagine he'd ever find again.

The bartender arrived with the gin and tonic he had ordered, only to call out angrily when Mikhail abruptly got off his stool and left without accepting the drink or paying. Eyes almost glazed over in his sudden bloodlust, he could only focus on finding the source of the scent.

He pushed through the crowd in a daze. More than once he vaguely registered someone sending him a dirty look for his rudeness or grumbling at him to watch where he was going, but he ignored them all. There was nothing more important to him in that moment than finding whoever possessed the blood he smelled.

A head of pale blonde hair appeared in his line of vision; it was a young woman standing outside on the patio, talking to a black-haired young man. Red eyes narrowed and full of hunger, he was unable to tear his gaze from her.

The scent was most certainly coming from her, of that he had no doubt, and he had to restrain himself from attacking her right upon this realization. The young woman turned around, eyes meeting his momentarily

through the crowd. He felt a mild jolt of something unidentifiable run through his body before her eyes then moved away without any form of acknowledgment and continued to scan her surroundings before she waved to someone behind him. The spell was broken, but he knew then who his prey was for that night. He would settle for no other.

“Kenneth! Get over here!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming,” the brunet called. For a moment he was obscured from their sight by a tall man who refused to move out of his way, but soon enough he met up with his friends.

Sophie Hart was not a happy camper.

“Kenneth!” she chided angrily when he finally reached her and their group. “How could you even *suggest* we come to a place like this? This place is horrible!” She motioned to the half-naked girls to their left, who had invested in very realistic but fake vampire fangs and eerily colored contacts.

“It’s probably just a roleplay night or something,” her friend Dean said, albeit a little bit grumpily. It seemed he was in agreement with her. “Who knows why people choose to act like they’ve been recently released from an insane asylum?”

Sophie nodded once emphatically, but she couldn’t help but crack a small smile at Dean’s choice of wording. “I totally understand people wanting to, um, stand out, but...” She followed Kenneth’s gaze and then frowned severely.

“Don’t be such a prude,” Kenneth said nonchalantly, his eyes focused on a topless woman wearing only a miniskirt with long lime-green hair and purple contacts. He quickly turned back to the group when Sophie snapped her fingers in front of his face, and then he shrugged as if his attention hadn’t strayed. “All I know is Leah said this place had the best prices on drinks in Canton,” he explained casually.

Sophie crossed her arms, pressing her full breasts upwards teasingly. She wasn’t completely unaware of the wayward lecherous stares this action attracted, but she graciously chose to ignore them. “And why are we taking her advice on where to drink? They’ve been doing nothing but going to strip clubs and places like... like this!

“Sophie, just *chill*,” Kenneth said, raising his arms and motioning to their surroundings. “You don’t even have work tomorrow, right? What’s wrong with a little fun?” Kenneth gave her an easy grin.

“Ugh, I’m sorry, but this place just really freaks me out. I don’t like it here. It feels like so many things could go wrong so easily...” She trailed off when she noticed a bald man dressed in skin-tight black leather and an absurd amount of buckles blatantly staring at her. She opted to take the high road and ignore it, but chills still swept down her spine.

Dean noticed her discomfort and draped his arm over her shoulders teasingly. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ll protect you, no problem.” He flexed his other arm, showing off an impressively-muscled bicep, and the cheesy grin on his face made Sophie roll her eyes.

Her discomfort was temporarily forgotten. “Oh my god, stop it,” she said, pushing him away and laughing. Both Kenneth and Dean laughed along with her, and any sour mood was displaced. She then asked, “Is anybody else coming, or is it just us?”

“Vikki’s not coming,” Kenneth said. “She said, and I quote, ‘Drinking is unhealthy and a recipe for disaster. I won’t partake in it.’” He imitated her words in a falsetto voice, sticking his nose up in the air to mock their friend’s superiority complex. “As for anyone else, I don’t know.”

Dean chimed in, “Neither are Greg or Holden. Apparently they’re at a strip club for Holden’s birthday.”

“Great. Just great,” Sophie said with an exasperated sigh. “I’m alone with two boys who haven’t aged past preschool.”

“You wound me,” Dean said as he slapped a hand over his heart dramatically, quickly proving her point. “My soul bleeds.”

Sophie sighed and nudged him with her elbow, perhaps using just a little too much force because he grunted. “Cut it out, ‘Introduction to Theatre 101.’”

“That’s cold,” Kenneth said, crossing his arms and pouting playfully. “At least I can hold my liquor better than a preschooler.” Sophie only barely stopped herself from rolling her eyes yet again. While Dean might have had a smidgeon of maturity in him, Kenneth’s allure was based in his fun, party-going ways rather than intellectual conversation.

Against her will, Sophie soon found herself laughing and smacking him on the shoulder when he didn't stop pouting. "Don't be dumb, Kenneth."

"Whatever," he grouched before getting back to business. "Well, since we're here, we might as well see about those prices, right?"

Despite her better judgment—even though her friends were enthusiastic, her feelings on the bar overall were still firm—Sophie agreed and the trio made their way to the nearest bar. The Virgin Saint was jam-packed with people and thankfully, not all of them were dressed to look like vampires. At the same time, she found that more of them than she would have imagined had fake fangs that were fitted to their mouths, and if that wasn't a waste of money, she didn't know what was.

Beneath her attempt at a confident façade, however, was fear. Even if vampires were mythical creatures at best, she couldn't help but be frightened of them. After her mother's bloody, gruesome death at the hands of a vicious serial killer, she found all thoughts of blood and by extension, blood-drinking vampires, unwelcome thoughts in her mind. Even vampire bats could rile her fear. She knew that at the age of twenty-two she shouldn't be frightened of such things anymore, but it wasn't something she found she had a choice in.

Unlike her friends, who were roughly pushing past people without a care in the world, Sophie prided herself on the good manners her parents had instilled in her. She took the role of apologizing to those that Kenneth and Dean had offended, repeating apology after apology.

At some point during her attempts to placate her friends' rudeness, Sophie found that she had lost track of them in the throng of people.

"Oh, crap," she muttered under her breath upon realizing she had no idea where they were. She had made it to the bar, but they were nowhere in sight.

Simply not wanting to be at the nightclub turned into an active desire to go home. This place made her very uncomfortable for many reasons—some she could place, some she couldn't.

It didn't help that she stuck out like a sore thumb in a room full of people dressed in all black—even those not dressed up as vampires still wore mostly dark colors if they wore much of anything at all. With her light green

tank top, faded blue jeans, and red heels, she looked very much the part of someone who had wandered into the wrong place—and the occasional odd look she got from those she passed by only made it more obvious. She could only ignore the stares and search for Kenneth’s bright yellow t-shirt, the only distinctive color that would reveal her friends.

In her search, she wasn’t exactly paying attention to what was right in front of her and suddenly, she ran headlong into someone who hadn’t had the courtesy to step out of her way, even though he was facing her.

Instinctively, she mumbled an apology and tried to move around him, but on either side of him were large, tightly-knit groups.

“It’s quite alright,” came the smooth, velvety tenor from whoever she’d run into. She looked up, surprised that the man was speaking to her and interrupting her search. Even more surprising was that he hadn’t moved to get out of her way when she was obviously trying to pass through.

Sophie glanced up at the taller individual, who was still standing there resolutely, and immediately had her breath taken away. She tried to attribute that to anything other than fear, but nothing else fit.

The man in front of her was incredibly intimidating. He was tall and lean, but even though his figure was slim he seemed to radiate something unidentifiable that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. He had dressed the part to come to The Virgin Saint, but it was a tamer version of what others were wearing, which she thought was probably a good thing. Something about him made her feel uncomfortable, though. It wasn’t his translucent pallor, which was strange to see in Canton, nor was it the unfriendly look on his face or the red-colored contacts, although those were outright startling.

Their eyes met and yet he still didn’t move.

“Um... excuse me?” she said at last, slightly louder than usual to ensure he heard her. She had a feeling he wanted to hit on her or something, but she had no interest in such activities. “I need to get by.” She motioned vaguely with her hands for him to let her pass, trying to make her expression as blank and disinterested as possible.

He was looking at her intently and didn’t seem to hear what she’d said. The look in his eyes was a little disturbing, she decided—it was like he was

sizing her up, inspecting her. Sophie decided she didn't like it; most girls didn't appreciate being looked at like they were cattle.

"*Excuse* me," she repeated, a little more forcefully. With all the people around, it would be just as difficult to go around him as it would be to simply go through him. However, she was starting to consider being as rude as her friends and simply shoving him out of the way.

The man shook his head, as though suddenly alert again, and then smiled pleasantly.

She stiffened, seeing the fake fangs that so many people seemed to have here, but had little time to focus on her discomfort when he said, "Care for a drink?"

"*No*," Sophie ground out. She futilely turned around, looking for any sign of bright yellow. She turned back to him, irritation getting the best of her, and said forcefully, "I'm not interested."

He raised an eyebrow and then smirked. It was a very different expression than the smile he had been wearing before, and it seemed to match his face much better—it made him look dark, threatening. A shiver ran down her spine.

"Your friends are at the other bar," he told her abruptly, pointing towards the bar across the room.

Sophie instinctively followed his finger and sure enough, she saw Kenneth's reassuring bright yellow t-shirt, along with the boy himself.

She turned back to him, blinking in surprise. "How did you-?"

The strange man had apparently slipped away in the split second she wasn't looking at him.

The blonde sighed. "*Creepy*," she muttered, but nonetheless made her way over to her friends. After much less politely shoving her way through the crowd—annoyance and fear made for good motivators—she finally met up with Kenneth and Dean. She was in a considerably worse mood than she had been before. What kind of guy even acted like that?

"Where were you? We lost you," Dean asked when she finally arrived.

"Yeah, I noticed," she replied sharply. She glanced wearily the empty shot glass Kenneth was holding. "Are you guys going to be a while?"

Because I kind of feel like going home.” She couldn’t help but be little afraid after meeting that strange man, even though it was most likely unjustified. Asking her if she wanted a drink, and then pointing her toward her friends when she declined? The fact that he had even known she was looking for them and what they looked like was frightening enough in and of itself. At least the others just stared.

“Oh, come on, Soph. Just a little longer?”

Finding a surprisingly empty barstool, Sophie took a seat and tried to force the weird thoughts about the stranger from her mind. As long as she stayed with Kenneth and Dean, she’d be safe. “Fine. But you’re not getting so drunk you can’t walk home on your own, okay?”

“Of course not,” Dean replied with a haughty sniff. Kenneth had the decency to not say something that would likely be a lie, and Sophie knew she’d be helping them walk home. In a way, that was a little reassuring.

“Bet I can drink more than you!” Kenneth challenged Dean out of nowhere, although Sophie had been expecting something of the sort since the moment she had been invited out.

“In your dreams!”

Sophie sighed, cradling her head in her hands. It was going to be a long night.

Then, as Kenneth and Dean continued to drink and drink for the sake of their impromptu contest, she felt eyes on her. It was a disconcerting feeling, knowing that she was being watched, even though she supposed she should be used to it because of her body type. She assumed it was just the kind of thing that happened to girls who frequented these types of places, but the feeling still sent shivers down her spine. It was when she was escorting her completely-plastered friends home that she actually became afraid.

The feeling was not going away, and somehow she knew she wasn’t being paranoid this time, unlike other times, usually when she was walking around at night by herself. She was being followed and with her friends in their current state, they would be of no help—in fact, they would be a liability. She had been stupid to let her friends get this drunk.

Regretting having ever left home on a Saturday night in the first place, Sophie steeled herself and hoped that she was truly just imagining the

feeling of being followed.

The closer he was to her, the more his control over his bloodlust seemed to weaken.

Standing in her way on purpose so she would run into him and give him an opening to separate her from her friends had almost made him lose control of his instincts. He'd had to fight his urges viciously to stop from draining her right then and there. It would have meant massive damage control, and his sire would likely never forgive him for such a mishap.

While it had been satisfying enough just to be near her and indulge in her scent, as it was what he had to settle for when she declined a free drink, he found himself craving her blood more and more as time went on. The moment she left The Virgin Saint hadn't been able to come soon enough.

It did, eventually, but she left with her friends. He had no issue eliminating the two intoxicated males, but three families to placate were harder than one, and might draw media attention. While the government could handle it well enough, it was better to keep to his singular target. He could manage to be patient just a little bit longer.

From the rooftops, he followed them, easily keeping up by vaulting from roof to roof and landing silently as only a vampire could. He didn't need to see them—he only had to follow the tempting scent of his prey's blood.

One after the other she dropped them off at their respective apartments and it soon became clear that two young men lived rather close to each other. First the brown-haired young man arrived at his apartment, then the black-haired one, one right after the other. As soon as she had left the last apartment complex and was presumably on her way back to her own, he dropped from the roof and landed stealthily only yards behind her.

She stopped suddenly and he wondered if she had somehow heard him. It would make things simpler, not even having to introduce himself before she started running, but after the momentary pause she began to walk again. Her posture was wary, however, and he could smell the chemicals of fear tainting her scent.

What a smart little human. She at least knew that someone was there following her, although she had no inkling of how dire her situation was. She

was completely unaware that her life was soon to end.

He followed her for a good while, keeping to the shadows and carefully controlling how much sound his footsteps made. The smell of her fear was becoming palpable as she became more aware of the fact that she was not alone on her walk home. She kept near the lights and away from dark alleyways, and he applauded her conscientiousness, but it would not save her.

Then, under a lamplight, she stopped altogether. She took a deep breath, and then said, "Stop following me or I'll call the cops. I know you're there." Her voice was unwavering despite her obvious fear of him.

He couldn't repress the chuckle that bubbled from his throat. The police, controlled by the government, would not be a threat to him. Nonetheless, he stepped out from the shadows. "That's not very polite. I was simply enjoying the... view."

She whirled around, eyes wide. She obviously hadn't expected him to actually reveal himself.

"Y-you?" she stammered, and it came out as more of a question than an accusation. That was rather amusing.

"Yes, me." He paused, allowing her to absorb her situation. He couldn't resist letting some fang show past his lips.

She backed away, not taking her eyes off him and staying close to the lamppost. "I thought I made it obvious I wasn't interested!" Her confident, angry words were belied by her trembling voice. "What do you want?" The last came out barely audible, but he could hear her perfectly.

Enjoying the situation far too much, he pretended to think about her question. "For you to go along with me quietly?" He then bared his fangs and relished the way her fear spiked.

There was no response to his sarcastic reply. He saw her trembling hand reaching for her purse, probably where her cell phone was. "What, afraid of vampires?" he mocked.

"Vampires don't exist, you freak," she spat. "Leave me alone." Her hand had clasped over her cell phone. "I will *seriously* call the cops. Go away."

He knew it wasn't an idle threat, but it still didn't faze him. In a flash, he utilized his superior speed to appear directly in front of her and grab the hand that held her phone. Clenching his cold hand over hers, he crushed the phone as she held it.

She screamed and tried to tear her hand away, but he didn't allow it. Her hand, cut because she had still been holding the phone as he mangled the technology, released fresh blood generously. It immediately filled his senses and he started salivating hungrily. It was all he could do to command her, lest he end the chase before it began.

“Run.”

Terrified and more than a little confused, she complied, wrenching her hand from his grasp successfully and taking off as quickly as she could in her heels. He was somewhat surprised she wasn't screaming as she ran. Although it was conducive to the chase, he was somewhat annoyed that her fear wasn't being properly shown.

He let her go, though, knowing that she would need a decent head start for the hunt to be any fun, but more so it was the fact that she would hope she could escape him; when she realized that she couldn't, her fear would multiply exponentially.

After all, he lived to be feared.

The part of town they were in wasn't the greatest in terms of resources given the consistently beat-up cars lining the street and the shabby buildings on either side of them, so he decided that her scream of pain would probably not attract too much unwanted attention. He was willing to be more than patient for this hunt. Some of her blood had trickled onto his palm when she released her phone and he took great pleasure in licking it off his skin.

It became clear then that the reason he was so attracted to her blood was because its unique cinnamon and honey flavor was one he'd never experienced before. Usually the taste of blood only differed by a relatively small margin, depending on the human's health and emotions; he had never tasted blood that had any relevance to human food.

He was already addicted, and it grated on him that after he was finished with her the magnificent taste would likely be gone forever.

Once her footsteps had faded sufficiently, he went after her. He took his time, scaling the nearest building silently and leaping from roof to roof. He noticed she was headed towards a more populated and wealthier area of Canton and he felt a tingle of displeasure course through him. He wasn't sure if it was the direction of her home or not, but he knew that the more people there were the more likely she was to escape him. That couldn't happen, not when she was already too much of a loose end.

He sped ahead of her, and then, just as she was turning a corner that would have allowed her to escape him, he landed in front of her. "Wrong way, my sweet," he purred, sadism tinging his voice.

She shrieked, and this time it irked him. It was more than possible that someone might have heard, and he would have absolutely no one interrupt his chase. She turned around to go the other direction, but the scent of the blood flowing from her hand was too much. Instead of taking the rooftops again, he began to herd her towards an alleyway that was dark enough to be sufficient for his purposes. If she wasn't panting so hard from running, she would probably be attracting much more attention.

"Leave me alone!" she yelled. He could smell her tears.

Mikhail shivered with anticipation.

And then it was time. The chase had been satisfying, but it was time to reap his reward because he couldn't risk attracting any innocent bystanders—he wouldn't chance letting this one go. Utilizing his inhuman speed, he appeared before her in an instant. She yelped in terror as he shoved her backwards into the alley. The girl stumbled and fell, but was immediately trying to get back on her feet. At this point she was breathing so hard that it made it impossible to catch her breath to call for help, so the only sound in the alleyway was her sobbing and panting.

"Leave... me... alone!" she begged through her labored breathing. He stalked towards her, observing her closely. Her breasts heaved in the most attractive of ways as she scrambled away from him and it was strange, but he found himself actually desiring the striking young woman. It wasn't a completely foreign feeling to him, but he very rarely felt such urges, and never towards a human.

This acknowledged, it was even more a shame that she had to die.

“Get up,” he commanded, his eyes narrowing. She glowered at him obstinately but staggered to her feet anyways, stumbling a little due to her heels. He questioned her intelligence then. Why wouldn’t she have discarded her shoes if she was as desperate to get away at her fear displayed? There was no way the heels hadn’t hampered her movements.

Mikhail pushed this negative character assessment aside and focused on the task at hand. He could see in her expression that she was formulating a way to get away from him. It was futile, but nonetheless the fact that she thought she still had a chance was comical. It also made him wonder, yet again, whether she just determined or simply daft.

He began to slowly move towards her. Her teary eyes were flitting everywhere, trying to keep an eye on him while still looking for a chance to escape. It was a useless endeavor, but he allowed it—the longer it took him to reach her, the more her delectable fear spiked and flooded his senses. A low, hungry growl came from his throat.

“I’ll do anything,” she stammered, backing away unsteadily. “Just leave me alone.” She was clutching her purse to her chest, blood trickling from her injured hand.

His eyes honed in on the drops of red slowly spilling down her elbow to the ground and found himself annoyed that such wonderful blood was being wasted. He began to advance more quickly.

She was panicking now. “Seriously! Leave me alone!” she demanded desperately. He was suddenly upon her and she cried out, turning to run, but he caught her bloody hand.

Mikhail yanked her closer as he inhaled the intoxicating scent of her blood, nearly making her fall. He was salivating heavily and swallowed so as to not look like a slaving beast, although in that moment he may as well have been.

Her dark grey eyes widened in horror and it was clear that the only thing stopping her from screaming at this point was morbid curiosity. When he finally allowed himself to taste her, licking her hand wantonly, she made a disbelieving retching sound.



She was now breathing even more heavily, obviously nauseated by the sight of him feeding. She was horrified into silence as he began to suck on the wound, drawing more blood to the surface. His eyes, glazed over with bloodlust, met hers and maintained eye contact as he continued to assault her hand.

“Sick freak,” she spat with surprising anger and conviction—clearly her self-preservation had disappeared with the extent of her horror.

He finished with her hand, giving it a final lick. “Perhaps,” he agreed blithely. The comment riled her and she yanked at her hand, fear forgotten.

“Let me go, you vampire-wannabe! Go be disgusting somewhere else!” she shouted. Her face was pale with fear.

He wasn’t often annoyed by words like that, but for some reason this particular human saying them irritated him beyond belief. Mikhail gripped her wrist tightly and then propelled her into the nearest wall. She let out a loud whimper as her head snapped back against the brick. She didn’t stop pulling at her hand but he ignored it, instead advancing upon her quickly.

“I suppose I would wish I was a fake, if I were in your situation,” he mused, a touch of anger leaking into his voice. She glared at him and then, in a moment of clear desperation, kicked out at him. If it were to land, her three-inch heels might actually cause him pain.

However, he knocked her leg to the side carelessly with his knee and she wobbled, unable to hold all her weight with one trembling leg. As she fought for balance, she spat, “Vampires aren’t real. Get over yourself! I’m telling you one last time, leave me alone!”

It was refreshing that she had such a fighting spirit, he supposed. Most anyone would be in shambles, screaming and begging for their lives, but not she. While she was frightened, she was also valiantly trying to hide it. It was pointless because he could smell the fear in her blood, but the sentiment was appreciated.

He leaned in. She was small compared to him, but not overly short. Her petite form made her seem smaller than she was.

“I think you’re about to find out that you’re wrong,” he murmured. His sire often told him that it was a waste of time and energy to play with one’s food, but Mikhail had never quite been able to agree with that. Perhaps he

was considered particularly sadistic for a vampire, but the smell and the *taste* of fear was of a pleasure equivalent to that of an orgasm. It had never affected him negatively in the past, so he saw no reason to forgo his favorite part of the hunt.

“Back off,” she replied quaveringly. Her momentary anger had completely dissipated in her fear and her harsh words betrayed her actual feelings.

Their noses were practically touching and she trembled with terror, but she never broke eye contact. In her own defiant way, she was daring him to try anything. It was a challenge. She obviously wasn’t thinking straight—at this point his victims were usually begging for their lives and crying hysterically. It was cemented in his mind then: she really was quite stupid. That, or she was reckless, which in his mind was practically the same thing.

Nevertheless, Mikhail never backed down from a challenge.

For a moment, he wanted to make her act like his previous victims. He wanted to cow her into submission, terrify her until she started crying like she should be and make her beg for her life. However, as much as he wanted to draw out the last part of his meal, being so close to her and hearing her blood pulsing through her veins, tasting her warm essence on his tongue, he found he could hold out no longer. The bloodlust overwhelmed him and with the deftness and speed of a viper, he latched onto her neck and pierced the skin with his fangs. All she could manage was a choked, surprised gasp before he viciously began to pull blood from her jugular.

The sensation of this feeding was unlike any he’d ever had, her flavor so rich and sweet that it made him dizzy. Before he knew it too much time had passed and she had gone limp, her pulse fluttering. There wouldn’t be enough left in her soon and she would die if he kept going.

He had no qualms about taking a life, especially if it was his meal’s because that was typically unavoidable, but at the sudden, simple thought that he would never taste her blood again, Mikhail was brought to pause.

Would it really hurt to let this one live? He didn’t have to keep her alive for too long, just till the end of his time in Canton. It was more than likely that he’d never find blood like this again—what was the harm in taking the time to enjoy it fully?

Making his decision abruptly, he pulled away from her neck and lapped at the bite mark, savoring the last traces he would taste that night and letting his saliva help the wound scab over. It would leave a nasty bruise and would serve to show her when she awoke that this encounter hadn't been a bad dream. The mark would prove his existence to her—she couldn't be allowed to forget him when he would be back to visit her many times before his vacation was over.

It was then that he realized he didn't know her name, her address, or any of the details necessary to keep her in line. Annoying, but easily fixed.

Allowing her unconscious form drop to the ground carelessly, he retrieved the purse she'd unthinkingly dropped when he'd slammed her into the wall. Upon finding her ID, he was able to ascertain her name, age, address, and everything he would need for the future months he had of vacation.

Name: Sophie Hart. Age: 22. Address: 2027 Celestial Grove, Ste. 3.

There was more information, but most of it was easily discerned from simply meeting her, such as hair color, eye color, height, and so on. He noticed how her blood type was AB. How coincidental and yet unsurprising—AB had always been his favorite.

Tucking the ID back into her wallet and the wallet back into her purse, he observed the unconscious young woman in front of him. Looking at her more closely, he reasoned it was only natural that he desired her for more than just her delicious blood. She was curvaceous nearly to a fault, with a slim waist but wide hips and a generous bosom. Her face simply accentuated her already-pleasing body with full lips, a cute, feminine nose, and high cheekbones. She dressed strangely conservatively for her body—certainly she knew that if she took advantage of her looks, she could woo any man she wanted into submission?

Then again, it was perhaps for the best that she dressed as she did because he felt oddly possessive of her, disliking the thought of any other seeing what she had to offer. He considered the situation—he desired her, and it was distasteful to think of any other male knowing her that way. What did he have to lose if he decided to experience all she had to offer? He had never experienced this kind of possessiveness in the past, at least not

towards a living being, so it somewhat unsettled him that he was feeling it now. However, it was a useless thought and so he pushed it from his mind.

His thoughts trailed back to the two young men. For their sakes, he hoped that neither were romantically attached to her, because the last thing he was going to do was share. This Sophie Hart only had a month or two left until her inevitable expiration by his hand and he intended to make the most of it. There was no way he would permit her to be with another man.

Mikhail hoisted the unconscious girl up and took to the rooftops again, trying to call up on what little he knew of Canton so far to get an idea of where she lived. It would not do to have someone seeing him carrying a limp body, especially given how battered she looked. In all honesty, he hadn't hurt her much, but the blood from her hand had caked and dried and her clothes were dirty from her fall. All in all, she was a bit of a mess. Then there was the mark on her neck. To those who did not believe in vampires, the bruise would be mistaken for strangulation.

Remembering her zip code from the ID card, he found that with a little wandering he found the direction that led to her apartment. He smirked when he realized that she had been purposely leading him away from her home. It was an easy matter to get there, and he climbed easily over the gates that guarded the community—he found they were townhomes, which was also very convenient, just like many things seemed to be in this situation. Less contact with neighbors meant less chance of being caught or discovered. The whole thing was turning out to be rather ideal and it all brought forth the thought of fate.

Pleased, he found her home with little issue and, withdrawing her keys from her purse, entered the abode.

It was a small but pleasant place to live. A single bed in a single room on the second story and the lack of any other strong human scents signified that she lived alone, which made things, yet again, so much simpler. Upon entering her room, he laid her on her bed. Leaving her there, he checked the refrigerator and found that while she did not have orange juice, something ideal for someone who'd just had the majority of their blood drained, she had a few other helpful drinks and foods that would aid a quick recovery. Still, she would need to purchase certain foods to help spur on her blood production.

Deciding that his job—making sure she healed quickly and was full of blood to spare for a later date—was sufficiently completed, Mikhail went on to a slightly more pressing matter.

He'd never left a victim alive before, but he knew logically that someone who survived an attack would want to tell someone—anyone—about what had happened for fear of it happening again. His prey could not be allowed such liberties.

In the end, it was a simple matter of threatening her friend's lives. Since she'd brought them home first, he had a good idea of where they lived and it would be easy to eliminate them. A quick, scrawled note outlining the threat that would result in her silence concerning her attack, as well as orders about what to eat for a speedy recovery, was posted to the refrigerator. For her friend's sakes, he hoped she found the note before she said anything because he was completely willing to kill one of them as an example to make sure she understood the severity of her situation. If in the more likely case she told the police, he wasn't worried. She'd likely be sworn to silence despite her situation—the government was very strict on keeping the existence of vampires a secret.

Convinced that his prey's compliance was ensured, Mikhail locked her door from the interior and then left through the window, leaving it open so she knew that the attack, the threat, and his ongoing presence in her life were not figments of her imagination.

Thoroughly satisfied with this new turn of events, Mikhail was not averse to taking a leisurely stroll back to his hotel room on the opposite side of town.