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This was such a bad idea, she thought, and there were those tears again, bubbling up along with panic. What was she going to do? Walk up to the door and beg to be a roommate? How lame-ass was that? They'd think she was pathetic at best, a head case at worst. No, it had been a dumb idea to even blow the money on cab fare.

It was hot, and she was tired and she hurt and she had homework due, and no place to sleep, and all of a sudden, it was just too much.

Claire dropped her backpack, buried her bruised face in both hands, and just started sobbing like a baby. *Crybaby freak*, she imagined Monica saying, but that just made her sob harder, and all of a sudden the idea of going home, going home to Mom and Dad and the room she knew they'd kept open for her, seemed better, better than anything out here in the scary, crazy world...

'Hey,' a girl's voice said, and someone touched her on the elbow. 'Hey, are you OK?'

Claire yelped and jumped, landed hard on her strained ankle, and nearly toppled over. The girl who'd scared her reached out and grabbed her arm to steady her, looking genuinely scared herself. 'I'm sorry! God, I'm such a klutz. Look, are you OK?'

The girl wasn't Monica, or Jen, or Gina, or anybody else she'd seen around the campus at TPU; this girl was way Goth. Not in a bad way – she didn't have the sulky I'm-so-not-cool-I'm-cool attitude of most of the Goths Claire had known in

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school – but the dyed-black, shag-cut hair, the pale make-up, the heavy eye-liner and mascara, the red-and-black-striped tights and clunky black shoes and black pleated miniskirt...very definitely a fan of the dark side.

‘My name’s Eve,’ the girl said, and smiled. It was a sweet, funny kind of smile, something that invited Claire to share in a private joke. ‘Yeah, my parents really named me that, go figure. It’s like they knew how I’d turn out.’ Her smile faded, and she took a good look at Claire’s face. ‘Wow. Jeez, nice black eye. Who hit you?’

‘Nobody.’ Claire said it instantly, without even thinking why, although she knew in her bones that Goth Eve was in no way bestest friends with preppy Monica. ‘I had an accident.’

‘Yeah,’ Eve agreed softly. ‘I used to have those kinds of accidents, falling into fists and stuff. Like I said, I’m a klutz. You OK? You need a doctor or something? I can drive you if you want.’

She gestured to the street next to them, and Claire realised that while she’d been sobbing her eyes out, an ancient beater of a black Cadillac – complete with tail fins – had been docked at the curb. There was a cheery-looking skull dangling from the rearview mirror, and Claire had no doubt that the back bumper would be plastered with stickers for emo bands nobody had ever heard of.

She liked Eve already. ‘No,’ she said, and swiped

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at her eyes angrily with the back of her hand. 'I, uh – look, I'm sorry. It's been a really awful day. I was coming to ask about the room, but—'

'Right, the room!' Eve snapped her fingers, as if she'd forgotten all about it, and jumped up and down two or three times in excitement. 'Great! I'm just home for break – I work over at Common Grounds, you know, the coffee shop? – and Michael won't be up for a while yet, but you can come in and see the house if you want. I don't know if Shane's around, but—'

'I don't know if I should—'

'You should. You totally should.' Eve rolled her eyes. 'You wouldn't believe the losers we see trying to get in the door. I mean, seriously. Freaks. You're the first normal one I've seen so far. Michael would kick my ass if I let you get away without at least trying a sales pitch.'

Claire blinked. Somehow, she'd been thinking that she'd be the one begging for them to consider *her*...and normal? Eve thought she was normal?

'Sure,' she heard herself say. 'Yeah. I'd like that.'

Eve grabbed her backpack and slung it over her own shoulder, on top of her black silver-studded purse in the shape of a coffin. 'Follow me.' And she bounced away, up the walk to the gracious Southern Gothic front porch to unlock the door.

Up close, the house looked old, but not really run-down as such; weathered, Claire decided. Could have used some paint here and there, and the

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cast-iron chairs needed a coat, too. The front door was actually double-sized, with a big stained-glass panel at the top.

‘Yo!’ Eve yelled, and dumped Claire’s backpack on a table in the hallway, her purse next to it, her keys in an antique-looking ashtray with a cast-iron monkey on the handle. ‘Roomies! We’ve got a live one!’

It occurred to Claire, as the door boomed shut behind her, that there were a couple of ways to interpret that, and one of them – the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* way – wasn’t good. She stopped moving, frozen, and just looked around.

Nothing overtly creepy about the inside of the house, at least. Lots of wood, clean and simple. Chips of paint knocked off of corners, like it had seen a lot of life. It smelt like lemon polish and – chilli?

‘Yo!’ Eve yelled again, and clumped on down the hall. It opened up to a bigger room; from what Claire could see, there were big leather couches and book-shelves, like a real home. Maybe this was what off-campus housing looked like. If so, it was a big step up from dorm life. ‘Shane, I smell the chilli. I know you’re here! Get your headphones out of your ears!’

She couldn’t quite imagine *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* taking place in a room like that, either. That was a plus. Or, for that matter, serial-killing roommates doing something as homey as making

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chilli. Good chilli, from the way it smelt. With...garlic?

She took a couple of hesitant steps down the hallway. Eve's footsteps were clunking off into another room, maybe the kitchen. The house seemed very quiet. Nothing jumped out to scare her, so Claire proceeded, one careful foot after another, all the way into the big central room.

And a guy lying sprawled on the couch – the way only guys could sprawl – yawned and sat up rubbing his head. When Claire opened her mouth – whether to say hello or to yell for help, she didn't know – he surprised her into silence by grinning at her and putting his finger over his mouth to shush her. 'Hey,' he whispered. 'I'm Shane. What's up?' He blinked a couple of times, and without any change in his expression, said, 'Dude, that is a badass shiner. Hurts, huh?'

She nodded slightly. Shane swung his legs off the couch and sat there, watching her, elbows on his knees and hands dangling loosely. He had brown hair, cut in uneven layers that didn't quite manage to look punk. He was an older boy, older than her, anyway. Eighteen? A big guy, and tall to match it. Big enough to make her feel more miniature than usual. She thought his eyes looked brown, but she didn't dare meet them for more than a flicker at a time.

'So I guess you're gonna say that the other chick looks worse,' Shane said.

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She shook her head, then winced when motion made it hurt even more. 'No, I – um – how did you know it was—?'

'A chick? Easy. Size you are, a guy would have put you in the hospital with a punch hard enough to leave a mark like that. So what's up with that? You don't look like you go looking for trouble.'

She felt like she ought to take offence about that, but honestly, this whole thing was starting to feel like some strange dream anyway. Maybe she'd never woken up at all. Maybe she was lying in a coma in a hospital bed, and Shane was just her lame-ass equivalent of the Cheshire cat. 'I'm Claire,' she said, and waved awkwardly. 'Hi.'

He nodded toward a leather wing chair. She slid into it, feet dangling, and felt a weird sense of relief wash over her. It felt like home, although of course it wasn't, and she was starting to think that it really couldn't be. She didn't fit here. She couldn't actually imagine who would.

'You want something?' Shane asked suddenly. 'Coke, maybe? Chilli? Bus ticket back home?'

'Coke,' she said, and, surprisingly, 'and chilli.'

'Good choice. I made it myself.' He slid off the couch, weirdly boneless for his size, and padded barefoot into the kitchen where Eve had gone. Claire listened to a blur of voices as the two of them talked, and relaxed, one muscle at a time, into the soft embrace of the chair. She hadn't noticed until now, but the house was kept cool, and the lazy

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circle of the ceiling fan overhead swept chilly air over her hot, aching face. It felt nice.

She opened her eyes at the sound of Eve's shoes clomping back into the room. Eve was carrying a tray with a red and white can, a bowl, a spoon, and an ice pack. She set the tray on a coffee table and nudged the table toward Claire with her knee. 'Ice pack first,' she said. 'You can never tell what Shane puts in the chilli. Be afraid.'

Shane padded back to the couch and flopped, sucking on his own can of soda. Eve shot him an exasperated look. 'Yeah, man, thanks for bringing me one, too.' The raccoon eye make-up exaggerated her eye roll. 'Dork.'

'Didn't know if you wanted zombie dirt sprinkled on it or anything. If you're eating this week.'

'*Dork!* Go on and eat, Claire - I'll go get my own.'

Claire picked up the spoon and tried a tentative bite of the chilli, which was thick and meaty and spicy, heavy on the garlic. Delicious, in fact. She'd gotten used to cafeteria food, and this was just...wow. *Not*. Shane watched her, eyebrows up, as she started to shovel it in. 'Sgood,' she mumbled. He gave her a lazy salute. By the time she was halfway through the bowl, Eve was back with her own tray, which she plunked down on the other half of the coffee table. Eve sat on the floor, crossed her legs, and dug in.

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'Not bad,' she finally said. 'At least you left out the oh-my-God sauce this time.'

'Made myself a batch with it,' Shane said. 'It's got the biohazard sticker on it in the fridge, so don't bitch if you get flamed. Where'd you pick up the stray?'

'Outside. She came to see the room.'

'You beat her up first, just to make sure she's tough enough?'

'Bite me, chilli boy.'

'Don't mind Eve,' he told Claire. 'She hates working days. She's afraid she'll tan.'

'Yeah, and Shane just hates working. So what's your name?'

Claire opened her mouth, but Shane beat her to it, clearly happy to one-up his roomie. 'Claire. What, you didn't even ask? A chick beat her up, too. Probably some skank in the dorms. You know how that place is.'

They exchanged a look. A long one. Eve turned back to Claire. 'Is that true? You got beat up in the dorm?' She nodded, hastily shovelling more food in her mouth to keep from having to say much. 'Well, that totally blows. No wonder you're looking for the room.' Another nod. 'You didn't bring much with you.'

'I don't have much,' she said. 'Just the books, and maybe a couple of things back at my room. But - I don't want to go back there to get stuff. Not tonight.'

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'Why not?' Shane had grabbed a ratty-looking old baseball from the floor and tossed it up toward the tall ceiling, narrowly missing the spinning blades of the fan. He caught it without effort. 'Somebody still looking to pound you?'

'Yeah,' Claire said, and looked down into her fast-diminishing chilli. 'Guess so. It's not just her, it's – she's got friends. And... I don't. That place just – well, it's creepy.'

'Been there,' Eve said. 'Oh, wait, still there.'

Shane mimed throwing the baseball at her. She mimed ducking.

'What time is Michael getting up?'

Shane gave her another mock throw. 'Hell, Eve, I don't know. I love the guy, but I don't *love* the guy. Go bang on his door and ask. Me, I'm gonna go get ready.'

'Ready for what?' Eve asked. 'You're not seriously going out again, are you?'

'Seriously, yeah. Bowling. Her name's Laura. If you want more details, you're gonna have to download the video like everybody else.' Shane rolled off the couch, stood up, and padded off toward the wide stairs leading up to the second floor. 'See you later, Claire.'

Eve made a frustrated sound. 'Wait a minute! So what do you say? You think she'd do OK here, or what?'

Shane waved a hand. 'Whatever, man. Far as I'm concerned, she's OK.' He gave Claire one quick

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look and a crooked and oddly sweet smile, and bounded up the stairs. He moved like an athlete, but without the swagger she was used to. Kind of hot, actually.

'Guys,' Eve sighed. 'Damn, it'd be good to have another girl in here. They're all like, *Yeab, whatever*, and then when it comes to picking up the place or washing dishes, they turn into ghosts. Not that you have to, like, be a maid or anything, I mean...you just got to yell at 'em until they do their part or they walk all over you.'

Claire smiled, or tried to, but her split lip throbbed, and she felt the scab break open again. Blood dribbled down her chin, and she grabbed the napkin Eve had put on the tray and applied pressure to her lip. Eve watched in silence, frowning, and then got up from the floor, picked up the ice pack, and settled it gently against the bump on Claire's head. 'How's that?' she asked.

'Better.' It was. The ice began to numb the ache almost immediately, and the food was setting up a nice warm fire in her stomach. 'Um, I guess I should ask...about the room...'

'Well, you have to meet Michael, and he has to say yes, but Michael's a sweetie, really. Oh, and he owns this place. His family does, anyway. I think they moved away and left him the house a couple of years ago. He's about six months older than I am. We're all about eighteen. Michael's sort of the oldest.'

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'He sleeps days?'

'Yeah. I mean, *I* like to sleep days, but he's got a thing about it. I called him a vampire once, 'cause he really doesn't like being up in the daytime. Like, ever. He didn't think it was real funny.'

'You're sure he's not a vampire?' Claire said. 'I've seen movies. They're sneaky.' She was kidding. Eve didn't smile.

'Oh, pretty sure. For one thing, he eats Shane's chilli, which, God knows, has enough garlic to explode a dozen high-quality Dracs. And I made him touch a cross once.' Eve took a big swallow of her Coke.

'You – what? *Made him?*'

'Well, sure, yeah. I mean, a girl can't be too careful, especially around here.' Claire must have looked blank, because Eve did the eye-roll thing again. It was her favourite expression, Claire was sure. 'In Morganville? You know?'

'What about it?'

'You mean you don't *know*? How can you not know?' Eve set her can down and got up to her knees, leaning elbows on the coffee table. She looked earnest under the thick make-up. Her eyes were dark brown, edged with gold. 'Morganville's full of vampires.'

Claire laughed.

Eve didn't. She just kept staring.

'Um...you're kidding?'

'How many kids graduate TPU every year?'

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'I don't know... It's a crappy college, most everybody transfers out...'

'Everybody *leaves*. Or at least, they stop showing up, right? I can't believe you don't know this. Didn't anybody tell you the score before you moved in? Look, the vamps run the town. They're in charge. And either you're in, or you're out. If you work for them, if you pretend like they're not here and they don't exist, and you look the other way when things happen, then you and your family get a free pass. You get *Protection*. Otherwise...'

Eve pulled a finger across her throat and bugged out her eyes.

Right, Claire thought, and put down her spoon. *No wonder nobody rented a room with these people. They're nuts.* It was too bad. Except for the crazy part, she really liked them.

'You think I'm wacko,' Eve said, and sighed. 'Yeah, I get that. I'd think I was, too, except I grew up in a Protected house. My dad works for the water company. My mom is a teacher. But we all wear these.' She extended her wrist. On it was a black leather bracelet, with a symbol on it in red, nothing Claire recognised. It looked kind of like a Chinese character. 'See how mine's red? Expired. It's like health insurance. Kids are only covered until they're eighteen. Mine was up six months ago.' She looked at it mournfully, then shrugged and unsnapped it to drop it on her tray. 'Might as well stop wearing it, I guess. It sure wouldn't fool anybody.'

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Claire just looked at her, helpless, wondering if she was the victim of a practical joke, and if any second Eve was going to laugh and call her an idiot for buying it, and Shane would go from kind of lazy-sweet to cruel and shove her out the door, mocking all the way. Because this wasn't the way the world worked. You didn't like people, and then have them turn up all crazy, right? Couldn't you *tell*?

The alternative – that Eve wasn't crazy at all – just wasn't anything Claire wanted to think about. She remembered the people on the street, walking fast, heads down. The way the mother had yanked her little girl off the street at a friendly wave.

'Fine. Go ahead, think I'm nuts,' Eve said, and sat back on her heels. 'I mean, why wouldn't I be? And I won't try to convince you or anything. Just – don't go out after dark unless you're with somebody. Somebody Protected, if you can find them. Look for the bracelet.' She nudged hers with one finger. 'The symbol's white when it's active.'

'But I—' Claire coughed, trying to find something to say. *If you can't say anything nice...* 'OK. Thanks. Um, is Shane—?'

'Shane? Protected?' Eve snorted. 'As if! Even if he was, which I doubt, he'd never admit it, and he doesn't wear the bracelet or anything. Michael – Michael isn't, either, but there's sort of a standard Protection on houses. We're sort of outcasts here. There's safety in numbers, too.'