



# ROAD OF ABSOLUTE RUIN

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Avenue

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ROAR

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# Chapter One

Felix Matheson-Farrell —————

A large overpopulated, dilapidated city. Towering skyscrapers shadow its many capillaries and fade into the smog. Overrun by pollutants and vice. Garbage, random debris, and sometimes bodies litter the drains. It is a place of homelessness, impoverished suffering, and the favored feeding ground of several vampire clans. Fledglings mark windows and tag walls with the names of their brethren. Though outnumbered, a handful of hunters patrol constantly. Cold ashen fingers parted the blinds. Warm, orange light glanced off of a trampish vagabond curled up on the floor. He was bleeding only a little from his neck. Most of the blood was drained from his body and soon he was to die from shock. In his eyes, the room was much dimmer than it really was. The voice he heard was louder. "My obituary was always on the wall. Perhaps I have changed a lot, but how could I if I don't age? The reflection on the glass, the frame, the smile in the picture throws people off..." Outside. The bronze plaque on the building read: "THE DONOVAN KIPLING HOUSE FOR THE HOMELESS". Dusky smog rolled over the setting sun, diffusing its fulvous rays, and rendering its light a pale and sickish glow over the asphalt. Polluted and dry. One unkind touch from the invisible hand of fate and the city would crumble

into dust motes. Rise, dissipate into the night. It lay over the land, oxidizing. Dying. Slowly, slowly becoming more and more cragged. Hordes of people infested each and every building within its limits. Swarming busily over the streets, going somewhere, always nowhere. They were part of the decay. It was obvious. Surely, because the more developed areas, modern, and more prosperous areas of the city were not as populated. Less traffic. Less trampling. Less livestock. Less feeding. Thus, it was good here. He preferred to live nowhere else. This was the age of convenience. Changing with the times was only natural. Life was too long to continue holding onto the past. Humanity was now inconceivable. Strong was the dominion of blood thirst over his thoughts. Weak were the specters of love, kindness, and compassion that once he craved but rarely received as a man. As a monster, he tasted only bile for those things. "I'm older than this building we are in. I was around when it was being constructed and it was named after me when my body was fished out of the canal by the weir. I jumped in to save a girl after I saw her bruised and battered body thrown down there. I drowned when the dam wall was raised. Why did I do it? Why indeed..." Wan, gray eyes regarded the dying soul at his feet as the blinds closed. Darkness fell. Trembling, the bleeding man listened to the softly droning whispers of Donovan Kipling. The vampire turned around finally. Donovan was moderately tall, dressed plainly in a crisp shirt, a pair of working slacks, and patent leather shoes that made no sound when he stepped. His tongue flicked out to draw in the last remnants of blood from

around his lips and he knelt down beside his prey. The fragility of life owed itself to an organ no bigger than a balled fist and a beat that could scarcely be heard in a room as silent the one they occupied, on the third floor of the homeless shelter. He mused over the fact as he placed his gentle hands on either side of the man's head and snap-broke his neck. "I was a downtrodden and dejected individual who was tired of the world and its heartless ways. I thought to myself that I would start caring about others in the hopes that I could change things by example. Make life at least a little bearable for someone else even though dozens passed me by daily. Looking the other way..." "The girl turned out to be a vampire. A hunting duo by the name of 'Matheson' and 'Farrell' witnessed me jumping in and watched me drown in that blood clouded water. A crowd of civilians joined them. When the question was raised if there was anyone willing to rescue me, the woman Matheson said, 'that water is so full of filth' and to which her man, Farrell, replied, 'if it were someone else then'..." Donovan understood now why people looked away. They were too ashamed at themselves for enjoying what they saw. Glad to be witnesses instead of victims. Separate from the pain. No part of it. No changing it. All that was far away. Hazy.

The door creaked open and Eckard Sullivan leaned into the threshold with his elbow casually propped against the siding. His eyes were sunken in. His torn and threadbare attire hung loosely over the sallow flesh of his gaunt frame. It was an unexpected trespass of Kipling's territory,

but Eckard had his reasons. There was no room in his ravenous feeding schedule for social calls, unless he chose to do both things at the same time. Feeding off of new friends was just as satisfying as feeding off of enemies. “Kipling, why are you kippling away here in all this human kipple when there is a hunter snooping around your parts outside? Have you seen him? I spotted him an hour ago passing through the south end. Aren’t you interested?” The ghost of mischief invaded his wry demeanor. Eckard wasn’t about to comment on the deep emotional angst, but he couldn’t hold in his excitement for walking in at the right opportunity to stoke the fire. “It is the son of the Matheson and Farrell.” His fangs were white, very white. He reserved a special kind of hatred for the boy Felix Farrell. Seeing him nearly caused Eckard to lose his temper and he wasn’t in the mood to be angry just yet. At least, not until he was in imminent range of wringing the boy’s neck. This singular chance at the young hunter’s life couldn’t be wasted. If he escaped one more time, if he slipped through Eckard’s grasp again, there’d be no stopping the vampiric tatterdemalion from a rampage in the open street during evening rush hour. He imagined doing that often. With the help of Donovan however... perhaps Eckard wouldn’t have to take such drastic measures to draw the hunter’s ire.

“Why should I be? The parents are dead. The daughter... was a victim of circumstance.” In other words, he needed a sacrificial lamb. An offering to the spirits of vengeance. Nothing more. The hunters didn’t recognize him or even recall the incident. Donovan Kipling wanted to be on even

footing with them. It wouldn't have been as fair or as satisfying if they didn't hate with the same level of venom. Or feel the same level of torment. Death was all too good for them. It was better than what they deserved. The last moments of his humanity, the terror and the despair, would haunt him forever. Their punishment was so swift and so brief that it disappointed him when they finally expired from it... Pale, soulless eyes beheld the other vampire at the door. Donovan stood and dusted off. He was close to what might be considered an amiable or compromising mood after feeding. The homeless shelter where he posed as a volunteer provided him with a constant supply of ready meals. Any human who walked through the door unknowingly became his property. Both vagrants and actual volunteers hoping to do charitable acts. If there were any police investigations, they were short lived. It was a dangerous part of town, thus disappearances here were a surprise to no one. It was even assumed that the homeless were culprit. The mentally ill and many crazed delinquents walked amongst them. It was a cruel world. A cold world. No humor. No patronization. Only misdirection. "What is it that you're after, Sullivan? I don't believe you're here for soup and bread. You want me to deal with the hunter, but why?" His voice was soft but the words were spoken heavily, filling the air with the echo of his discontentment at having his privacy disturbed. While he hated hunters, seeking trouble was an undesired activity for pursuance. If the hunters stepped on his toes, that was different. Few dared. As the light radiating from the blinds dissipated,



Donovan Kipling steadily turned into a black silhouette in the darkening room.

“I didn’t come to ask a favor, Kipling!” Leaning away from the threshold, he straightened his posture, and put his hands into his pockets. Eckard Sullivan fidgeted, “How does the saying go? ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend?’ You know why he’s here. You killed his family.” Didn’t he? It was three years ago. Eckard only heard the scantiest amount of details about Donovan’s extermination of the three hunters. Killing one was applaudable. The hunters stuck closely together. The death of an individual hunter summoned a dozen more. “Believe me, I’ve tried to kill him before. He’s difficult to get a hold of and slippery to handle. I don’t care by whose hand he dies. I leave to lure him now, but you keep it in mind that he won’t rest until he’s caught and killed you, Kipling.” Am I right or am I right? Yes, of course I’m right. Eckard tapped the air in front of his nose at Donovan’s general direction. He was backing up, backing out of that room. He turned around and simply left. Eckard wasn’t afraid of Donovan. It was just that killing him went against the plan. “Think... about it...” That was a ruse, only a bluff, but valid in its logic. Who knew who Donovan Kipling even was unless it was another vampire? Felix Farrell didn’t know, or did he? There were no human survivors. The secrets of their race depended on their ability to desensitize the sheep. Death, it happens every day. One person commits suicide about every forty seconds, one person is murdered every sixty seconds and one person dies in armed conflict every one

hundred seconds. The box cutter tumbled out of his pocket and Eckard swept it up immediately as he walked out.

The sixteen year old hunter Felix Matheson Farrell sat on the bridge, eating a bag of chips, with his feet dangling over the stone ledge. It was a bad part of town, but at night the only safe place was indoors locked up tight, eyes open, and sleepless. If paranoia was a real solution to any problem, which it wasn't. That was something he learned to get over with quickly when he first began hunting. After a full day of sun and showers, puddles scattered haphazardly over the bridge, over the little sidewalk, the road, and water beaded the steel support beams like cold sweat. From cat-eared hood to track shoes, Felix was clothed entirely in black and had nothing to fear when it came to wet stains in embarrassing places. His socks were white though, only because he needed a sure fire way of knowing when it was time to do the laundry without having to do a smell check. There wasn't a lot at night to eat but junk food. That was okay, since there was no one to berate him about it anymore. When the bag was empty of chips he scrunched it up in his hands and tossed it into the water. There wasn't anyone to yell at him for not picking up after himself either. He still felt guilty after doing it, but told himself it'd biodegrade instead of choking out a baby seal. It was a paper fiber based bag with wax coating or some healthy earth friendly shit... The young hunter stood and began to walk down the bridge. It was an hour after sunset. Time to get a move on... Blocks away, the vampire Eckard Sullivan caught sight of those cat ears and growled. The

dim, saturated light of the street lamps exposed the young hunter, to all eyes that dwelt in the darkness, as he walked down from the bridge. Is he close enough yet? No, not yet. Eckard had to capture the boy's attention before he made a turn down another street. On this one, the constant distraction of gleaming wet pavement and cheap electric streetlight blackened the shadows until accurate depth perception was impossible. How to sneak up on the hunter without being seen? This was solely about timing. Eckard pulled at his frayed sleeves in anticipation. Twitching eyes fell on a bundle of dirty blankets, newspaper, and taped up cardboard on the ground in the alley behind him. The box cutter snicked and clicked eagerly. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the hunter's sound, the hunter's smell, and the hunter's position. Flickering nostrils calmly made their estimates by the second until the hunter was deemed close enough to see red blood run. Eckard plunged into the makeshift shelter and wrestled the sleeping wino out. The box cutter slashed several vicious times. Then the vampire threw the injured old man stumbling into the open street crying out in pain and bleeding profusely. Surely someone like the boy, he judged, was still young enough to have heartstrings and the naïveté to match. If it were an injured vampire, Eckard would've left him to die, watched, or finished him off. Humans were different, weren't they? He was counting on the boy's humanity. What was humanity, again? Who cares?! He vanished around the building to flank the hunter from another direction...

From the corner of his eye, just before the side of his hood

obscured it, Felix Matheson Farrell spied a cumbersome shadow fall. He was in fact about to go down a smaller, less lit up street to explore the skid row underworld, but opted to find out what was going on. A vigilant hunter didn't ignore suspicious activities. Black sneakers rapidly smacked the gas and oil-slick road as Felix ran over. "Hey! S'goin' on?" The young hunter noticed the pooling blood immediately. Aw, fuck... Blood and translucent rainbows swirled into cracks and potholes nearby. He grabbed his phone from his back pocket and dialed with his thumb. Felix knelt down and gently nudged the old man who was going unconscious. "Hold on, I'm gonna call you an ambulance. Hang on-hello? Yeah, my name is Felix Matheson Farrell. I'm on 2nd Avenue and Harborside. Please-an ambulance. Somebody got stabbed. He's alive but, he's bleeding..." Felix remained on alert as he listened to the voice on the other side of the line. The street looked empty right now, but it likely wasn't, not really. This was obviously some kind of trap. Felix knew he should've been able to see the knife-wielding perpetrator run off or at least hear him running away-if the perp was human. The only things he could see moving were the zooming cars on the other side of the river, across the bridge. "Okay." He hung up and pocketed his phone. Instincts told him to leave and leave now, but Felix Farrell stayed by the injured man. He figured to wait until police and emergency people arrived. The blood would attract vampires. Felix was about to reach into his yellow backpack for something to defend himself with, but he realized it would look bad when the cops

arrived to see him armed standing above an injured man and they'd make the wrong connection. The young hunter stood there in open, scanning the area like a clock face on a novelty plastic cat. His heart pounded...

It wasn't his intention to put the boy on high alert, but the added element of fear would work in his favor anyway. Yes, yes it would. Why wouldn't it? Listening to the ticking of Farrell's heart, the vampire Eckard Sullivan paced agitatedly behind a building as he came up with a different plan. He couldn't jump the hunter now. He heard those sneakers, the slight scraping, scooting, and the unconscious breath of the bait he'd used. While the distraction held the boy in place, he needed to act. Eckard chewed on the dried crust of blood underneath his fingernails, scrunching his face, hissing rabidly at nothing but his thoughts. There was no time to waste however, because soon the police and the ambulance would arrive. The answer struck him as his harried fist banged the driver's side of a parked car. With no seconds to lose, Eckard punched out the window and unlocked the door. He threw himself into the seat, scattering the glass, and hot wired the vehicle. Tires screeched as he sharply took the corner at high speed. Eckard stopped a hundred feet away from the hunter, engine revving, and switched on the high beams. He poked his head out and shouted, "You're as good as dead meat, hunter-you're roadkill! HA-haHAhaHA-HAH!" Laughing maniacally, Eckard returned to his seat and stomped on the accelerator. His fierce eyes burning with excitement, the headlights bleached

away everything in their path all except the blood on the ground which was still bright red... "FAREWELL, FARRELL! KITTY-CAT-GO-SPLAT! MR-OW!!!"

Grimacing and squinting, the young hunter Felix Matheson Farrell shielded his eyes until they were adjusted to the brights. "You're ON, sucker!" The buzz of his cracked voice roughed up the night air worse than the revving car engine. Felix didn't want the stab victim to get run over, so he did the best thing he could think of-run at the car like it was chicken with shopping carts-as the psychotic vampire was jabbering away about morbid things that brought to mind the image of vegans weeping over squirrels printed with tire treads. It kind of made him tear up and that pissed him off even more than he already was because Felix totally loved animals. He met the car halfway-jumped-rolled over the hood-yellow backpack slamming into the windshield. Gripping onto the edge of the driver's side window, Felix reached in and seized the wheel with his one free hand, forcefully wrenching it to the side. The car steered around the bleeding man, but continued to throttle forward, now skidding and swerving from the sudden change in route. Felix let go of the wheel, finding a hold in the side mirror. The young hunter was just tall enough to hook his instep over the opposite edge of the windshield, struggling to stay atop of the car.

Eckard was looking forward to splatter. It was annoying to have the boy all over his windshield alive, but Eckard Sullivan could care less so long as the little meddling idiot

was in his grasp. The vampire crinkled his nose gleefully and laughed with even more gusto into the hunter's face as Felix took a hold of the wheel. Eyes blazing with insanity, Eckard tried to throw Felix off the hood without success. "You make a very ugly hood ornament, kid! HA-haHAhaHAA!" When he regained full control of the wheel, the car whipped down another street and drove them far away from the scene where a police car and distant ambulance were just headed. Eckard drove onwards, with the occasional swerve to mess with the young Farrell scrambling to stay on the hood, making cuts through parking lots and going through red lights. This was his home turf, Eckard knew every nook and cranny of it at a glance. Random debris spun out from under the tires as they zoomed around corners and zig-zagged down straights. The farther down skid row they were, the more decrepit the tagged up surroundings became. Eckard took them to a section of dead businesses and empty, rundown buildings for lease. Using a fire hydrant like a pivot, they drifted over the curb. Black tire treads smeared the gritty pavement. The passenger side ate the corner of a condemned warehouse. All the remaining windows shattered as the car doors folded inward and bricks crumbled. The axle was beyond salvageable. Eckard totaled the car with complete and utter disregard for his own safety. Being a vampire had its benefits, mortal injuries were not sustained for very long.

"Y-yeah right-" The young hunter braced himself against the cruel throes of physics as the vampire drove them through lights and stop signs like an uncouth taxi. "-I'm

the HOTTEST-“ Knuckles white, Felix Matheson Farrell stubbornly plastered himself against the hood, windshield wipers, and glass. He was somewhat afraid of getting mosquitoes in his mouth as he was yelling, but still Felix kept on with it. “-fucker-“ Bugs were legit protein and he was still in his growing stages. His jeans already exposed more of his socks than was acceptable. They looked like the high-water pants of geezers, but he was too lazy to shop for new pants. Felix was gunning for a another foot of height. “-you ever seen in your whole damn LIFE!” Seeing where they were headed, he thrust himself off the car moments before it slid into wrecking-ball style doom. Crash! Bam! Boom! The friction from his roll wore down the fabric of his sleeve and exposed fresh abrasions on his arm. The young hunter didn’t completely escape injury or disorientation. A few feet away from the smoking new heap of scrap metal, he rose up shakily with bent knees, the yellow backpack in hand. Felix stumbled a little before managing to recover his usually slouchy posture. He pushed his hood back over his short, scruffy mohawk and slung the heavy equipment-laden bag over his shoulder to ground his balance. Adrenaline from the recklessly paced drive was still pumping through his veins. “Nice try, sucker! Even if you crash a car-you don’t look half as cool as me when I crash my bike! And even if you catch on fire right now-I’d still be hotter!” He swiped the air for emphasis with his pointing finger. It probably would’ve been better to stay down a second or two longer instead of getting up immediately, but he figured there’d be time for chilling



later after he beat up Eckard Sullivan's ass. The young hunter was just that confident.

Across the street watching was none other than the vampire Donovan Kipling. Directly behind the young hunter, by a couple of feet on the curb, beneath the orange street light. Just observing. Approaching without being seen wasn't difficult, they drove past his building earlier when he was already standing outside and he knew by that speed where they would end up. Crashing. Into the most vacant part of downtown, where there were only warehouses and empty buildings for lease. There used to be businesses years ago, but their proximity to skid row resulted in constant theft and shootings, banishing those franchises away. He gradually strode closer, while eyeing the boy with fervid curiosity. The slouch reminded the vampire of the man that watched him drown. If it were someone else... A fresh set of clothes. Crisp blue shirt and ironed slacks. Donovan was cleaner since the other vampire Sullivan saw him last. Because the homeless shelter he worked at gave him access to showers and laundry services, he washed and changed his clothes three times a day. More, if a victim thrashed harder than expected against his teeth. Shock and large amounts of blood loss to the brain usually quieted the struggling. Occasionally he found a victim strong enough to live up until the very last pint of blood being drained. Not that strength ever made much difference. They succumbed to death in the same manner their flesh gave in to his teeth. Sinking. Inevitably sinking. The mouthwatering scent of blood rising to the surface of damaged skin caught his

attention before the red smear on the asphalt did. The young hunter was clearly injured but carried on as if mortality was nothing. Such arrogance! In the end, Donovan decided that he would have to eliminate the young hunter after all. Eckard was annoying, but he was no fool and his advice was sound in its reasoning. The time to kill the young hunter was nigh before he grew in age, stature, and experience. Before he grew to become formidable opposition. Donovan was responsible for the deaths of the former Matheson and Farrell, including their daughter, the boy couldn't be spared. In a way, it wasn't even fair to have left him alive in the first place but Donovan meant only to do what he believed was necessary. Going out of his way to do anything without a specific purpose was ludicrous. For any parent, the death of one child was grief enough. He didn't need to abduct both of them. "Behind you, hunter."

It was a hard fall from a speeding vehicle. The pain just didn't register with him yet until he swiveled around, hearing that voice, simultaneously striding backwards to put distance between himself and the imposing stranger danger. Sharp, stabbing pain almost locked up his entire body the first inch he moved. A short exhalation of surprise resounded with the scraping of his rubber heels against the grainy asphalt. The hunter Felix Matheson Farrell was too quick to be caught off guard. "Get the fuck away from me! Fuck! Who are you?" Tiny white and red stars flitted across his vision like a nightmarish screensaver. His peripherals were eaten up by pain and dizziness. In his eyes, the vampire was barely distinguishable from the shadows

of night. Felix for a brief fleeting moment thought that he'd gone bonkers from a concussion and was talking to a tree—a tree wearing a button up shirt. Whoa! It was obviously another vampire. At this time of night, there were many of them prowling for car accidents and chasing ambulances, posing as lawyers and attorneys. Felix didn't doubt that the majority of them probably really were blood sucking neck-biters. He was in no condition to attack first. It was too much of a risk, because his coordination would be off.

Donovan's gaze travelled beyond the hunter and settled warily on the slowly recovering form of the vampire Sullivan amidst the smoking car wreckage. Either he had been lied to or simply misinformed. Probably not the latter. The boy didn't know who Donovan Kipling was and somehow came here by chance. Of all the places within the city the boy could've been to instead, he was here. Wandering around, and on the street where his family's killer frequented no less. The hunters had to have been shorthanded to allow this orphan minor to patrol skid row alone. Unless he came here of his own accord without telling anyone. Without anyone knowing. "Did they show you the bodies? Or even tell you the details?" There was no better way of introducing himself than to let the young hunter realize it. To say it aloud was anticlimactic. There was disappointment in his tone, having expected something different. Something other than a lack of recognition. Donovan raised his hands and adjusted his ivory cufflinks. In his hand was a phone, stolen from the boy only seconds ago before he hastily scrabbled away. Even from this distance, it was

easy to notice that all of the buttons on Donovan's shirt were irregularly shaped. Not round, but small and white. Looked like teeth. Carved from teeth. Blunt human teeth. Souvenirs. "I can tell you all the details you want. Starting with whose mouth my buttons were extracted from and from whose-my cufflinks." His voice was humorless, monotonous and dry. The recollection of those events which took place three years ago was sweet. Donovan wished to relive it. A slight rise of feeling widened his eyes as his attention fully returned to the hunter Felix Farrell. "Or if you'd prefer to guess, hunter, perhaps I'll give you three hints each." With one hand swung out over a sewer grate, Donovan crushed the phone and sprinkled the plastic shards into the sewers. The backlight flashed and sparked. The silicone case went down the storm drain nearly intact, but its remaining contents spilled over the metal grill. Cracked screen, crumpled battery, chips and all. An independent young man could take care of himself for a couple of hours. A couple of days. If no one knew where he was, they'd only call to check up on him. If he didn't answer, they still wouldn't know. Wouldn't know where to look or where to start. By then, the corpse would turn up. Right before the search was called off. After the vampire Donovan Kipling was finished with it. He made a mockery of humanity only because he was once a part of it. So he never laughed. The kid was yelling and talking crap. Scrambled words echoed unpleasantly in Eckard Sullivan's head over the whine of his inner ear. Groaning, the vampire kicked open the car door and stumbled out. There was no

seat belt to unbuckle. He was shook up, but not maimed. He popped his neck and rolled his shoulders. Bones, dislocated limbs and discs, clicked back into place as he took a couple of steps forward. He saw the boy trying to put up a front as a shadow approached him from behind. It was Donovan. As long as he was there, the young hunter's attention was divided significantly. So what if he had lied that the boy knew? He's here isn't he? Donovan was cooperating and even revealing himself as the blood sucker responsible for the deaths of those hunters. It was rare for vampires to come out into the open about specific murders. It was better to keep everyone in the dark, also each other if it was possible, in spite of rumors. The more secrets there were the better-the better to sneak up on a ripe bleeder like the Farrell brat! Eckard was feeling indescribable as he advanced. For too long he only imagined what it'd be like to finally, finally come close to beating the hunter until he was within an inch of his life then squeezing and wringing every little measly drop into oblivion. He was trembling with excitement, but his fist swung swift and true. "Time for a 'hurts doughnut'! HAhaHAhaHAH!" It's you.

A cold chill went down his spine. Felix Matheson Farrell stared at the vampire before him with horror. The hunters who recovered the bodies of his parents and his sister wouldn't allow Felix to see, but they let him touch the hands with his eyes closed and head turned away. There was no part of him that could deny that it was them, he knew, though they were stiff and broken. His palms came away cold and slick with blood. Let me see. Please, let

me see. But they wouldn't let him.... Felix snapped out of it quickly as he dodged the sucker punch nimbly as a fairy tale trickster. "No, thanks!" The vampire behind him might as well have been an elephant wearing steel toed boots walking through a glass miniatures shop during Black Friday because the young hunter heard him could've heard him coming from a mile away. "Up your ass!" He grit his teeth, cursing inwardly against the pang of fall injury. Every ache was worse in the cold. The young hunter followed up immediately with a counter and struck out with his equipment laden bag in hand. There were at least half a dozen hurts doughnuts in that backpack and it swept horizontally, appearing only as a heavy yellow blur at Sullivan-

Eckard Sullivan ducked in time. The kid's heavy, yellow sack of metal toys sailed through his slick brown hair and missed his scalp by a fair centimeter of space. While the young hunter was injured and barely recovering, the snarling vampire's strength returned to him fully intact and he was the one who took full brunt of the car crash. The humans just didn't get it, did they? They were weak as all hell and practically defenseless. Their teeth were barely equipped to bite a cooked steak. Vampiric teeth, fangs and incisors included, effortlessly tore through elastic flesh and stringy, raw human meat every night to feed. All they needed was the blood and they were more than capable of getting it. No hunter was going to stop them. Especially not this one. "What's the matter, hunter?" His frosty, undead voice took on a mock sympathetic tone. The red gleam of

bloodlust shined in Eckard's maddened eyes as he lunged and, using the momentum of things, swung his other fist. "No mommy or daddy to tuck you in tonight? HAhaHAH!"

"SHUT IT! DON'T YOU FUCKING DARE!" A grown man's rage overtook the young hunter's usually lax and cat-like demeanor and his eyes burned. The swing of his backpack was enough to unbalance his movements because the sixteen year old was gangly and still adolescent in frame, kind of awkward like a giraffe. But there was simply no way that Felix Matheson Farrell was going to back down now or run off even though he was at a disadvantage. It was three years, one month, two weeks, to the day his family was murdered. They came home in white body bags that were not nearly opaque enough to hide their mutilated condition. Day and night, he often broke into cold sweat just thinking about it.... These blood suckers from skid row were out of his league, but that wouldn't stop Felix. The concept of his own mortality didn't even cross his mind as he bobbed out of the way of Sullivan's ill-timed hook. Right here, right now, he was going to kill these two suckers and avenge everyone, everything, he had lost during the last three years... Felix allowed the remnant force from his bag-lady style swing to propel him all the way around and delivered a prompt spin kick-

## **Plainclothes Officer Carolyn Dahl**

The lure of drugs was strong in the earliest years when her son was only an infant and she, as a single mother,

struggled to get up every day and go to work. She knew it was wrong, but her son had to be left home alone while she earned the rent and she hurried home on lunch breaks to feed, change, and wash him. It was hard enough getting up in the morning. It was hard enough worrying if he would survive for four hours without her at a time. It made her feel bad as if she was neglecting him when every thought involved worrying maintaining her ability to clothe and feed him when she could barely provide for herself. The incentive to keep going should have been love. Instead, it was speed. Her son was a year old when she started shooting up methamphetamine. There were government programs, welfare, healthcare, and food stamps. There was nothing to keep her from falling to her knees on a bad day, and there were many of those. She loved him, she felt responsible for his life and yet it seemed simpler to give him up to someone else then kill herself discreetly afterward. Drugs. Until her boy was four years old. Drugs. There were weeks she had no recollection of. She had no memory of his first words or his first steps. Drugs. It started with forgetting to buy food. She thought she would never forget to feed him or at least bring home something from work for him to eat. A concerned elderly couple found him alone picking and eating breadcrumbs off of the ground in a nearby park. Where was she? She...? Authorities took him away and threatened to keep him from her for good unless she got clean. I have to get clean. I have to get clean for my son. Get clean. There were, however, some things that could never be left behind. Only now, it was necessary. It



was really necessary. She was a plainclothesman, a police officer working undercover. They could smell whoever was not one of them and whoever did not belong to their ilk. For some, a little make up did the trick. Experience told her that fake had a smell. So the bags under her dark lidded eyes were real. Make up took the illusion the rest of the way. Jeans soaked in cigarette smoke, off whites, and damaged leather covered up her lack of new scars. She stalked the streets and handled the most sensitive of cases involving the abuse of women and young children. She was the outsider looking in the window and the face in the mirror. Trouble befell those who were alone and vulnerable. Carolyn Dahl knew what that was like and there was no way she could ever forget; not in this world, not during these times. For now, one dose of speed, one shot, then they could smell that and believe it. It was that easy. The stick of the needle too. It cost no money at all to obtain, she had the ability to take anything at gun point. She rolled her sleeve back down and licked the cold from her lip ring. She had dyed her blonde hair black to blend in and not stand out. This was not something she usually did or a place she usually went, especially without telling anyone first, leaving her ID and phone at home also. The gun could not be brought either, if it was somehow removed from her possession then it could be used against her and others. Right now, her son was out there somewhere and it had already been two days. Each minute that passed decreased the chances of finding him alive. Before leaving the door of her motel room, she rested

her hands against the grain of the door and prayed. A distant memory of her grandparents telling her to knock on wood inspired her to do so. It was supposed to bring good luck or ward off evil. Please God, not my son. If I can save him, let me save him. Don't take my son from me.... Unless... he is better dead than alive... right now... wherever he is. But if I can save him, then let me save him. Please. The week was paid for. Once the speed kicked in, she expected not to come back for any reason. It was only to record her existence before disappearing, before walking into the underbelly of the city. The streets were cold and the skies between each building were filled with smog. There were almost no leads to follow, but hundreds, thousands of leads about others who had been abducted for blood trade. If she went missing, someone would come looking for her. Plainclothesmen were supposed to report in once a day. She made no plans to alert anyone on the force where she was going. Some of them probably already knew. But what was a mother to do? She spent more than half her life taking care of him, he was legally an adult now, but he would always be her baby. Have I failed you? Where to start, where to go, who to ask without looking suspicious? She was scared and she was angry. All she could do for now was walk and visit local establishments listening for information on where an abductee might be taken. Where did the blood dealers sell their stock? Who did they sell to? Where? Where? ...SKID ROW. Nine years ago... "I want to live forever." Said the candle to the flame. "What of your soul?" The dark lady asked. It was her honor that stayed her

hand. Few had honor. Many claimed it. Rare and valued. His eyes gleamed unnervingly with hunger and she knew it was hopeless to argue or convince him. All her efforts to warn him against the turning were made in vain. Still, she spoke her piece. "Assuming that all humans have one, yours will be lost when you turn. They say it is immortal. The soul." He knew. "I want immortality the way your kind experiences it. I want to live. I don't want to die." He knew something. "Deathlessness per se is not the same as being alive. We hold humans like you in contempt. You are insects crawling beneath us." Her icy voice pierced him deeply. "You live off of these insects. Without us, you would die." He thought he knew. They always did. She paused to silently relish in the wake of his stupidity, then cocked her head in careful contemplation. "Perhaps." The dark lady replied. "Without feed, we wish that we would die." "Say you will turn me." "I wish to turn you because I feel I owe you. Yet I cannot fulfill my debt unless you prove worthy to my race. Provide me with ten years of service as my familiar. If you can withstand to grief your own kind for that long then your humanity will be forfeited without the need for my blood which purges it." If vampires were not meant to turn other creatures then they would not have the ability. If men were to live forever then they would've been born vampires. Centuries of thought swirled around in her head. Controversy, ethics, philosophical debates. Decisions and consequences. He could see that she was hesitant, but not unwilling. "When you become hollow, then I will fill you. I am superstitious when I am cautious. I know not if

there are repercussions for such a deed. Others may have fledglings that number even into the thousands, but I have none. Because of my beliefs.” “Believe that I’ll serve you well.” “You who were born from a mother?” It didn’t mean anything. Especially coming from a being who couldn’t remember being a child. Ever. “Death ceases existence.” The deal was made. “I have no reflection...” Low. Lo. Low. Behold! The city’s lights glittered brighter than the stars. He had heard long ago, that when stars died, the light lasted for billions of years more. When a light bulb blows, it’s gone. Like that. In broken glass and dying sparks. The fragility of light. Intense, but weak. He couldn’t tell if the television was lying or not. Its words were something people frequently bought and sold. The ghosts of things it said almost didn’t make any sense. Well. Perhaps all light was artificial. Let it be known that, like light, death only belongs to men. Dawn, the day, and the rising sun all. The dark lady claimed to have no reflection and that there were no photographs of her, mirrors, or reflective surfaces in her abode. He was curious to the nature of her statement if it was true or if it was another myth as he rolled his slim, luminous black phone around in his palm. She only came to him when it was pitch black and he never had the opportunity to look at her image from its shiny casing. Correspondence between them occurred by phone, never by text, and it was rare to meet her in person. She owned several homes at a time and traveled from place to place in a migratory fashion. She was scarce. But he always had to be available. Vincent smelled dead. He

felt dead. That was the way Vincent preferred to present himself in public. The blood crusted on the skin of his arms was that of other humans. Dirt. It was disgusting to think about his own blood. His mother was always crusted with her own blood. So was he, as a child, for a time. Blood trade. Blood stock. Blood dealers. Vincent was born into it. He knew there was escaping from the cycle. Only, moving up in rank and status. As a familiar, he was better off than stock but still to some degree a slave. He hated it. One more year, she promised. Then he would become free. He would turn. The alleys were sick and damp. But the buildings offered more protection than none from the elements. From eyes. Vincent lit up a cigarette and watched the coin-op laundromat across the street... Perrault was afraid of getting caught. Running from the cops was not about avoiding the guns or their baton slash heavy aluminum flashlights. A lot of bad situations were perfectly solvable by playing possum and breaking out of the mortuary the minute people turned their backs and left the room for coffee. He found after some experimentation-like trial and error that his blood only pumped if he needed it to or if he was moving. If he laid still then everything but his mind stopped. He literally slept like the dead. This was what being undead was like. The prefix un- didn't make sense all the time either. It just so happened to make sense for being a vampire and only a vampire. If there was anything else out there that didn't have a pulse and moved then it was something else. Perrault didn't know anything about anything really. He assumed, because he

didn't know vampires really existed until last year. There was more to be afraid of now, but he wasn't afraid as much as he should've been normally if being human was a 'norm'. Suddenly there was an explanation for the freaks who ride the bus at night and why pedestrians in the first place at night were scarier than the ones walking around in the day. These weren't people grumpy from a long grueling day at work. They had just woken up, were hungry, and looking for an easy breakfast. If one couldn't be found then well, fuck, it had to be got the hard way. One out of three jobs that always paid for the living or the undead, was providing the masses with nummables, edibles, and drinkables. Bottom line: things-to-ingest-ables. Nobody wanted to do the work, it was messy as fuck and more trouble than it was worth or to enjoy like half the time. As a kid he'd been afraid of oogily-booglies and now he was one-boo! He got used to drinking blood the minute the first drop touched his tongue-it didn't require any thought-but biting people to get it bothered him. He couldn't do it-something about that was nasty like unwashed necks, unshaved neck beards, aftershave, hairspray, gel. All that going in his mouth? Sick as stubble-might as well lick the floor of a gas station bathroom and proceed to the floor of a barbershop. He was raised to eat his food with a fork and knife and he wasn't about to go around forking and knifing people. It was probably the same for a lot of vampires who were originally humans, but the older and purer a sucker was the less likely they were going to feel bothered and they fucking did whatever they wanted.

So the blood dealer Perrault knew his customer base and definitely knew what they were looking for. Some guys put the blood in soda, juice, and wine bottles. That meant you wouldn't know where it came from and you kind of didn't want to know. He heard of dealers and traders that transported whole bodies-living ones-in trucks and freight. Those people were scary people. Perrault didn't want to be caught by those people and get mistakenly taken for a rookie who thought he was hotshit trying to get in on somebody else's territory or get recruited by a bloodthirsty mob boss who would later if not immediately start a gang war with another bloodthirsty mob boss and then proceed to use him as a body shield. Perrault wasn't stupid-he knew what dangers were involved and exactly how to go about his business discreetly. Perrault stole pouches of blood cat burglar style from clinics and immediate care then stored the things in a blue bodied white lidded cooler with ice. Never a red cooler, because it somehow pulled police aggro and gave people some bad ideas. It had to be a blue cooler, like the ones with soda and freshly caught fish from the pier. The only problem was keeping himself from drinking his own supply. Right now he was strolling down one of the longest streets in the city, lovingly coined Skid Row, drinking blood from a pouch in a paper lunch sack from a bendy straw waiting for businesses and clinics to close or at least for foot traffic through their doors to die down. He still needed money even though he was undead. He couldn't believe how many vampires lived in the sewers and he didn't want to join them. Vampires like himself needed to

pay rent and utilities like anyone else. Fuck living off the radar. According to human records, he was still alive and he was-sort of in a way. And just for the sake of looking like a weirdo in a gas mask and a jet black trench coat, he stopped in front of the large glass window of a small, poorly-run emergency clinic and stared and sipped.

## The Missing

Underneath the city lies a maze of dark, dimly lit tunnels and sewers. The constant rumble of the subway trains rattle the lights. The bulbs loosen until they receive no more power, and city maintenance crews scarcely come to fix the lights. Many stations remain only partially lit year round with the brightest glow coming from the inside of the train cars where from the windows, the outside cannot be seen. THE UNDERCITY: where thousands of commuters pass through everyday, where the desperate homeless sleep to stay warm, and where people go before they disappear... Everyone has something to say. When the neighbors found out his mom was single and that her son was the result of teen pregnancy, well, that generated a lot of talk and it was the same wherever they went. Out there somewhere he had a father, who was never available to call, to show up on his birthday, or drive him to school. When his mom was struggling with the rent and going in and out of rehab, his father was no where to be found while he had to stay with neighbors until his mother was clean. They called it that, they used that kind of euphemism about it because



they honestly thought she was dirty. The neighbors, the teachers, and the other kids at school. Whenever they found out that he was half his mother's age, it was somehow funny to imagine what it was like for a kid to be raising a kid. It was lonely. He was an only child. He never heard anything about his grandparents, his mother's parents, or anything. When it was his birthday, Mom tried to buy more than one present to make up for it but sometimes they couldn't afford it. Not until he was older, too old, and those gestures lost their ability to mean anything. The little kid who grew up being concerned about looking like other people, fitting in, and being just like everyone else had grown into a young adult prematurely and did not care in the least about that anymore. He was tired of being alone. Mom was okay, but she was hardly ever around anymore. She had work. He had school, but did not go today. Or all of last week. He showed up for lunch and to show his face around school... Perhaps being the son of a cop, he was naturally unafraid when he wandered the streets alone, knowing that cops like his mom were always out there doing their job, to protect and serve. He also knew how the patrols worked and what paths the cars took. He knew where they biked, walked on foot, or were stationed. If they were going to look for him, they were not going to find him because he knew how to avoid them and where to go. He almost knew what he was doing. The fare he paid for was for all-day and all day, he rode the subway from one end of the city to the other and switched routes, switched cars, every couple of stops. Half the day

ago, the battery in his mp3 player lost its charge. With nothing to listen to, he stared at his feet for a long while, sometimes closing his eyes, while sometimes dozing off. The day crept into night; commuters after a long day of work began filling the cars. He dragged his backpack onto his lap. It was empty except for his flannel inside. Only thieves carried completely empty ones, until they filled it with something stolen. Not everything a person wants can be taken or stolen. He wanted something bad to happen, but nothing ever did happen to him. The subway was a lot safer than it looked. Public transit was the only way to go, even though Felix had a permit and knew how to drive. No one was willing to ride with him anyway. Something about brake, brake harder DAMN IT! We're all gonna DIE! So what if he took turns without slowing down-or even looking? The bus, cable cars, and subway didn't make a big deal out of seat belts. They didn't have seat belts. They didn't say that a minor had to be accompanied by an adult. Yeah, forever alone. That's me-fuck me-I don't give a fuck. So what? He had friends. He just didn't feel close to any of them. There were too many things he couldn't say to them. He couldn't explain everything because it was weird-all weird stuff. Like, one day you have a family-then, the next morning you don't. You just don't. He always wore a hoodie even when it wasn't that cold. It was really a security blanket. Felix didn't have a family to eat dinner with and he didn't want to eat alone. He always ate while he was out and about-never at home-never at any place he would be alone. In spite of the fact it was gross to

eat in enclosed public spaces-while riding underground city transit-the company was worth it. He thought of it as a work out for his immune system and by the time it finished the gauntlet of repetitions for the day then maybe he'd be stronger than he was yesterday, eating a breakfast burrito on the subway-like he was doing now. It wasn't breakfast, but it was the only kind of burrito he ate. Meat, no cheese, eggs, and hash browns. Sometimes he had chorizo. Other times he ordered ham, sausage, and rarely bacon. Few places ever fried bacon right. It was easy to eat a burrito one-handed. He pushed the wrapper with his face while catching hold of the occasional pole, handrail, and ceiling handle nearby whenever there was a hitch in the train car. It was common courtesy to yield seats to anyone who needed more than you did, and Felix didn't care if he was seated or standing. A place to be was a place to be. The crook of his arm hooked and squeezed a pole as the train slowed to a stop and the doors opened to release the prisoners therein. Hah. Hahaha. They were mostly grumbling, tired commuters and homeless going to find a less rumbly place to sleep. Felix didn't sleep much. He was a light sleeper and woke up way, way too easily. In the night, noises just sounded louder. When alone, they sounded bigger. He noticed things that other people didn't-like that kid over there who had been sitting in the same seat for five stops now. It was going to be nine o' clock soon and the subways shut down at midnight on weekends. "Hey." Felix knew he was going to be here until close and he knew that kid was planning to do the exact same thing-the

question was why. “Hey you, kid. How’s it going? How’s your day been?” They were more than likely the same age, but Felix was standing up. It made him feel a lot taller to be on his feet while everyone else chose to sit like slobs.

The next stop was some ways off. For the next fifteen minutes, it was now too late to disembark and move to a different car or a different train. While nodding off, he had forgotten to. Growing accustomed to the slow downs and the abrupt stops was easy when one was exhausted. The constant rumble and screaming of the rails echoed in his throbbing head. He had done virtually nothing today, but he felt drained and his eyes from the sterile, blue-green fluorescent lights were sore. Incandescent lights were still in use at some of the stations and he was unused to the changes. Pain and discomfort could make anyone drowsy. Another wearing a drab hoodie, jeans, and lugging a backpack was trying to talk to him. Why? To make friends? Nothing so simple as that surely, not in this day and age, and definitely not in this city. He wanted to ignore it. Being greeted in public by a stranger did not bode well with him and moreover it was coming from an immature nobody with nothing better to do than ride the train, eating dinner. It was too late when they made eye contact. He let half a shrug accompany his reply. “Can’t you tell?” His facial muscles told him he was smiling, but they lied. There were weights tied to his every sinew and his voice was drier than he wanted to sound. You can tell by the look on this guy’s face that he’s a smartass and thinks he knows everything, but actually knows shit...

This was a contest now. To give anything away about his personal life to this stranger was to lose. Desperation was not something he wanted to exhibit. Apathy was more like it. While other people talked to hear themselves talk, he talked only with the intention to shut someone up. If they wanted someone to listen to, then he was listening but caring was an entirely different and an entirely separate concept. He wanted more than anything to be numb and to strangle the world of its own noise. “Yeah, I’ve seen better days. Today was exceptionally crappy. What about you? What’s your problem?” The devil was in the details. Providing any meant he was asking for trouble. Answers were going to be kept as short as possible, brief, and meaningless. Given that normal people ignored each other, there was something else here that made them pursue idle chitchat. Small talk filled the void, humanized it, and made it seem less noticeable because silence choked. Boredom was a guise, a simple facade over the reality of it. Outside those wide, rectangular windows only shadows sped by. Crisp reflections of himself and everyone inside the train car were ghostly thin and translucent. Most of them had better things to do, to think about, and were lost in their own worlds that lurked somewhere out there beyond that darkness. He was unwilling to make conversation, but it was too late for that as well.

Felix laughed, but not too much. He wasn’t asking to hear about anybody’s problems and he figured nobody would want to hear about his. Shaking his head a little, he replied, “I don’t got a problem.” He wouldn’t doubt that he had more

than a problem. It was definitely plural as in, more than one. Lying was easier than telling the truth and sometimes he made a game of it, trying to tell the truth but not the whole truth, skirting having to tell any white lies—he considered that a form of cheating. Lies were like the burrito bits digesting in his belly. They weren't kosher, even minus the cheese and sour cream. Nearly the whole barnyard and a tortilla magic carpet went down in about nine minutes total. When it was gone to the very last potato shred, he crumpled up the wrapper and stowed the lump in his pants pocket. He didn't litter when people were watching; not only did it set a bad example but it made a bad impression. Being lazy was different from being dirty. Some nights were too harrying to allow the extra minute to find where to dispose of garbage much less allow a flashy slam dunk into a trash receptacle. Life wasn't about having fun, it was about work, and if fun had to happen then it had to be during work. He wondered if he was messed up sometimes when he was having fun working. If his parents were alive then they'd probably make him finish school before joining the workforce. Having a job sure beat having a class, but he'd still rather have his parents around instead and even his annoying older sister. Sis isn't older than me now... He thought about his family all the time. Somber thoughts, but he didn't have to stifle any cries. There were no more tears left in his body. The only water he had left was in the shallows of his eyes. His head snapped around and his eyes darted about the train car. It could've been coming from the subway itself or from within his imagination,

but Felix never brushed random sounding sounds off. It was second nature as a vampire hunter to pay attention to everything, real or not real. Screwing up his brows in contemplation, he figured from the melody that it was a ring tone. Someone's phone was going off in the depths of their pocket or bag. The kid he was talking to didn't seem to notice it at all. "Hey—your mom is calling you. Pick up. It might be important or something." His hearing was good, but his sense of direction was surprisingly not. There was too much noise. Silence was unheard of in the inner city. Everything kind of buzzed, hissed, rattled, and droned like a heartbeat for an inanimate object or the shuddering lung of a distant smoker. Maybe it was a dad too, instead, but Felix was just guessing anyway and it didn't matter if he was wrong.

He hated looking at anyone in the face as he was doing then to avoid looking at where his phone was stashed. To him at least, Felix had a young and dumb face; after sizing him up though, they were obviously around the same age and the other still dared to call him a kid. "How do you know it's my mom?" It most likely was, but he was sure that it was mockery rather than a prediction. Funny how a mother's love could ever be construed as something to be ashamed of, like he was ashamed. He actually loved his mom a lot, but was no good at ever showing that he did in the slightest. It was a burdensome feeling, to know that she alone fed, clothed, and sheltered him. The shoes on his feet and the hooded sweater he wore now were both old and battered because he disliked going shopping with her or

simply being bought new things. He showered twice a day, but wore virtually the same outfit every time he left the apartment. Being in charge of his own laundry was a small step towards feeling less like a burden but he took it as an opportunity not to wash anything other than his boxers, socks, and undershirts. I should pick up. He hesitated. The staring contest went on. With the phone continuously ringing, it was awkward. If he was alone then he would have picked it up almost immediately. Talking on the phone to his mom in front of another subway passenger, one who was staring at him with the foreseeable intent of eavesdropping, did not appeal to his early sense of what being a man was about. “Does your mom call you at nine o’clock at night?” Independence meant privacy and taking care of oneself. He had little luck with either. He finally picked up. “Hey. Sorry mom, I’m on the subway. I couldn’t hear my phone at first and I’m talking to somebody.” A police officer does not neglect to ask. “A friend.” He called Felix his friend because it sounded safer and better than ‘random person’. He would probably regret it. “Yeah. I already ate. Bye.” She was actually about to leave for work again. Dinner was frozen and microwaveable. He would eat it after waking up in the middle of the night, if he chose to come home tonight that is.

Felix only grinned. “I don’t remember the last time my mom called me. I got her text message a while back.” The sixteen year old didn’t say how long ago it was. The text messages were saved into his phone and were about three years old. It was creepy and sad, but he didn’t care. He



owned two phones to separate the past from present. The new one, the second one was for receiving and making calls. Nobody knew he still kept and paid the bill for his old number. His parents and his sister were still listed in the contacts. The old phone was used as a timepiece because he was morbid like that. Felix was proud of how clever his reply turned out. He considered himself a smart alec and crack rolled into one like a burrito. Another burrito would've been nice. The pole squeaked in the palm of his hand. He didn't know why, but his hands were always kind of sweaty. Stepping and leaning towards the phone with the fake intention of listening in, the grin on his face grew when he was called a friend. "Hi! Hi there! Is it okay if I come over? I wet my pants and I need to use your hair dryer!" It was all a harmless joke, dumb things only a friend would say in front of another friend, for the sake of fun embarrassment. He said it only loud enough to convince a mother that her son was out spending his time with the class clown from school. Felix used to be a clown and deep down at heart, he still was. "Bye!" Good or bad, a joke was a joke. A cat grin on a clown face was easy to keep up, real or fake. It was real. "Hey man, since we're friends now you can call me Felix. 'Cause that's my name." The brevity of the phone call was surprising and in some ways, unsettling. "You have a fight with your mom or something? You sounded pretty mad." There he went, sticking his nose in other people's business because he was funny. Funny weird was usually a different thing from being funny humorous. In general, he was both. Caring

about what other people thought about him was the last thing on his list and it was scratched out with a permanent marker. He wasn't afraid to ask questions. Answering them proved to be more difficult, but few people ever asked him anything.

He would never make friends with anyone like Felix, but his mom would never know a thing like that. Conversations between the two were rare because there was more often than not, nothing to talk about with each other. After the elementary school, he soon realized adults could not be depended on for everything and that absolutely no one had all the answers. Finding questions futile, he stopped thinking about them. He stopped asking. "You're out of luck, Felix. My mom doesn't have a hairdryer. She says the burning smell gets on her nerves." It was a lie. His mom did have a hair dryer. All women seemed to, but for the purpose of throwing Felix off, he decided to speak outlandishly. People like him won't leave anything or anyone alone. They're annoying as hell and they like to hear a lot of talk. Talk was cheap, and he could afford to do that. He could afford to talk as much as needed to get this guy off his back. Judging by the way Felix was standing there, getting only text messages from his mother, said that he had nothing better to do tonight than bug a complete stranger with mindless chatter. An introduction came after the phone was put away. "You can call me Knox." Of course his name was something else and 'Knox' was actually made up on the spot, derived from a favorite saying of his mother's and a fleeting memory of a TV show mentioning 'Tommy

Knockers' which surfaced as they entered a tunnel. The lights flickered briefly. It drew his eyes into an arc. "There's some guys I'm trying to avoid. I take as long as possible to get home because they wait for me towards the end of my route..." People liked getting answers. They liked to hear excuses and explanations. Knox was used to people looking at him with questions. When their questions went unanswered, their fabricated stories were sometimes worse than the facts. The only way he knew how to cope was to lie. It seemed to be the most effective way to control what another person thought. Lies were safe. Lies could be controlled and the truth could not be, because the truth was and was unchangeable. If he needed something different to deal with different people, control the varying ways in which they would react, then he had it. Knox would think of something. His mom never noticed that he had no real friends. No one knew what kind of person he was. He never wanted them to know. "...I said the wrong thing to the wrong guy. Now him and his friends got it in for me. I don't feel like fighting but they really want to beat an apology out of me, so I've been hiding from them. They'll give up eventually." A shallow sigh escaped his nose, grazing the roof of his mouth with just the right amount of exasperation.

Felix cocked his head and an eyebrow at a thoughtful angle and carefully to a polite degree. The subject of bullying wasn't something to be sarcastic about. If it was, he didn't feel like it. He had a better idea about how to go about other people's stuff. "I can back you up. A couple of guys won't

give me any problems. For real—I can beat the absolute crap outta them.” He shook his fist, thumb tipped at his chest. Underneath his shirt it was broad and flat like a slab of concrete, guaranteed to roll punches like a champ. Most people thought he was older than he really was. All his limbs had kind of a broad and flat quality like his skeletal structure was all steel beams and two-by-fours. Partnered with his fair skin and loose, bohemian clothes he looked like the super clumsy type. His stature was made for breaking things. The yellow backpack hanging off his shoulder swung slowly as the train car rattled. He wouldn’t use any weapons on human beings unless they were really tenacious or inhumanly drugged out. Felix doubted a couple of high school guys would be all that buff. They sat in desks snoring practically from eight to three, limbs atrophying, and fat building stores in places that would later hot balloon in their fifties. “After I’m done with them—they wouldn’t mess with you again. I have an effect on people—like explosions in a movie.” Cheek puffing, he blew air off the roof of his mouth and out the corner of his lopsided grin. His watery blue eyes were grave and serious. “If you let me follow down the street from your house I can watch out for you.” He honestly didn’t have anything better to do, so fighting someone else’s fight wouldn’t be going out of his way.