

**Kennedy Harrison**

## Barely Bitten

Without lending a second thought, the girl's mouth found the woman's neck. It was a practiced motion; something she had done too many times to count. The familiar sensation of warmth pulsed below the surface before the tips of her teeth broke the seal, allowing the thick, sanguine fluid to flow uninhibited into her mouth.

The woman let out a surprised shriek, using all of her strength to shove against the girl, but she held steady, leaning into the woman's body with no inclination of resistance. Her victim struggled for only a moment more before conceding to the inevitable numbness, and her limbs fell limp in the girl's arms.

After a few more moments, the girl stopped, flicking her tongue over the wound to stop the bleeding before pulling away. Slowly, she raised her hand to her mouth, upholding her index finger to pierce the tip with her canine tooth. Scarlet rose to the surface, a single red dot. She gently massaged her bloody fingertip into the fresh bite mark she had left on the woman's skin, and in seconds it disappeared. Self-control had taken decades to learn, but she had decided long ago that she didn't want to be a monster.

She let the woman's body sink onto the floor delicately. She would wake up with no memory of what had taken place, being able to only guess that her guest hadn't appeared to sample the makeup products she was selling out of her home.

The girl rose, letting her long, dark hair fall where it may and smoothing the wrinkles out of her dress. She was hardly a girl anymore—but would always be. She was frozen in that in-between stage, too young to really be considered a woman, but too old not to be.

She often wondered what she would look like as an old woman. If her hair would have turned gray, or just fallen out altogether. How her wrinkles would have formed, if she would have laugh lines or if her mouth would naturally tug down at the corners.

She had no desire to physically grow old—it was mere curiosity.

Immortality suited her. Her lips remained perfect and plump, ripe enough to wear any and all shades of lipstick that she desired. Her blue eyes stayed sharp and without crows' feet, and the years spent perfecting her cat-eye liner resulted in a perfect point.

Although she did consider herself to be quite beautiful, she wasn't vain. She used her appearance of youthful naivety and her proficiency with makeup to find her prey—her donors. She didn't want to be primitive. She wasn't an animal.

The twenty-first century made it all too easy to find people to feed on. Between Tinder dates and consultants that sold products out of their home—anything from makeup to kitchenware to diet products—the girl hadn't felt gnawing appetite in years. She learned early that mistakes were made on a hungry stomach, that the desire to keep her humanity in check was overshadowed when the duress of famishment mauled at her insides.

She sighed, staring down at the woman, whose eyes were still closed. She would remain unconscious for another hour or so, and then the venom would wear off and she would be able to resume her mundane life.

The girl turned away from her, gazing across the small apartment and into the kitchen. There was a certain scent emanating from it that enticed her closer. It seemed more delectable than blood, salty and light. It made the girl's mouth water, and even though her appetite had been satiated, her stomach lurched with sudden craving.

As she neared the stovetop, disappointment washed over her and her stomach dropped. She realized what it was before she saw it.

A loaf of perfectly toasted, golden-yellow garlic bread sat on a cookie sheet atop the oven.

She swallowed. It smelled so *heavenly*.

Food no longer appealed to her. She survived off of blood and blood alone. Although she could consume human food if she needed to keep up appearances, the taste of it resembled cardboard. But garlic

remained the one thing she physically couldn't eat, and the one thing she wished immortality hadn't taken from her.

Her maker, Myra, had deserted her the moment after she had been born into this second life. The girl remembered that while she was in the process of turning, Myra left an echo of a kiss on her forehead and whispered "You'll do well, Naomi. You deserve this," before disappearing forever. At the time, Naomi had thought she had done something wrong to deserve eternal life, but now she understood that it was meant as a compliment.

There was one gift immortality had presented Naomi with that she resented—the ability to remember. She remembered every bit of her human life with absolute clarity. She remembered Myra and all of the elegant lies she spun Naomi in order to win her blind affection. Every soft sigh and careful caress on her skin, every murmur of desire—forever cauterized in exact detail in her memory.

Naomi knew virtually nothing about Myra, aside from her allurements to younger girls. She hadn't recognized it at the time, before she was turned. But after so much time left to think about it, it was obvious now that Naomi hadn't been chosen because she was extraordinary in any way. She was young and vulnerable, and that was Myra's penchant.

In a time when her eroticism was considered taboo, Myra's predilection toward Naomi became her sanctuary. Her parents were hoping Naomi would marry a lawyer or some other young bachelor from money, although Naomi had no attraction to any sort of young man.

Myra hadn't remained around long enough to teach Naomi what this new life entailed. She had to figure out on her own that daylight scorched her skin and that her new appetite would cost many humans their lives.

Naomi remained staring at the bread on the woman's stovetop for several minutes. She couldn't even remember what it tasted like, really. Only that her mother had used it while cooking Sunday dinner every weekend, almost a century ago.

The soft aroma of garlic would radiate through their small home, overflowing into their yard. Naomi could smell it from a block away, and her mother would never have to call her inside for supper. The second she caught a hint of garlic in the air, she would wave goodbye to her neighborhood friends and bolt home, like a moth drawn to a flame.

There was a time she had tried to eat it, when she was still new to immortality. It had been a loaf of bread similar to the one she faced now, on the woman's stove—only, her self-control wasn't as practiced back then and crimson was sprayed all over the walls. It was still dripping from her chin, running down to stain her clothing, and the bodies of three mortals were stacked on the living room couch like fish at a Saturday market.

But the loaf stared at her, perched on their countertop, completely untouched. It was perfect. It smelled *perfect*.

It was then that a wail echoed solemnly through the silent house. Dread washed over her as Naomi suddenly realized that the humans on the couch weren't the only ones home.

Panicked, she snatched the loaf of bread off the stove and darted out the open kitchen window, the same way she had entered the home.

She had taken the life of someone's mother. The wailing child would grow up without a mother's touch, without her patient lessons. Similar to the way Myra left Naomi with no one to guide her, she had just rendered a newborn orphaned, with no one to guide it.

That conclusion alone is what drove her to vow to herself that she never again wanted to take away someone's mother. Or their sister. Or their friend. The dead weren't the only ones affected by her feeding routine.

After she had fled from the house and her guilt, she had made her way back to her boarded-up flat to retire for the day and realized the loaf of bread was still waiting in her pocket.

When she raised it to her mouth, it felt as though she had taken a red-hot piece of iron and branded her tongue. She screeched and dropped it instantly, but the sores in her mouth lasted for weeks.

In the dining room, the woman stirred.

For someone who had lived as long as the girl, what felt like a few minutes saturated with reminiscence passed nearly an hour already. She sneaked one final, longing glance at the loaf of bread before licking her lips and darting out the front door.