

### **Cursed by Fire by Danielle Annett**

All I saw was blood. Blood soaked my hands and coated the walls. It stained the concrete flooring of the abandoned warehouse and dripped from fixtures that hung from the ceiling, trickling like a slow rain. My vision blurred as anguish filled me. How could this have happened? How could I have been too late?

I stared down at the lifeless body of a child. A boy. Kneeling in a pool of congealing blood, I ran my fingers through his chestnut hair, ignoring the now-cool moisture seeping into the denim of my pants. His face was unrecognizable. Gone was the child with the dimpled cheek and brilliant blue eyes. Left behind was a mass of flesh and bone—a ruined body drained of its life force at such a young age.

Reality snapped like an elastic band, bringing me back to the present as I sat at my desk in Sanborn Place. Ripped from the haunted memories of finding Daniel's body.

The world was a cruel place. It was a fact of life and even though I knew it was true, I still had a hard time coming to terms with the atrocities people committed. The cruelties that for some god-forsaken reason, people thought were okay. Staring down at the wallet-sized photo now crumpled in my hands, I was greeted by a crown of chestnut hair, bright blue eyes, a heart-shaped face, and a brilliant smile; a single dimple on his left cheek. The face of an innocent seven-year-old boy, cut down like he was little more than a calf brought to slaughter. I found myself struggling to link the image of this smiling boy to that of the ruined body I'd found less than forty-eight hours ago.

### **Unhidden by Dina Given**

Cold marble pressed against my face, numbing my cheek. My stomach roiled from the spinning of the room, threatening to release my dinner. I took a deep, ragged breath and tried to keep the dizziness under control. A voice in my head screamed at me to get up and defend myself, but my body wouldn't obey. With a herculean effort, I pulled my legs under me in an effort to rise.

I felt the vibration in the floor before I heard the heavy thud of footsteps. The bastard was back for more. *It must be my lucky day.* A vice clamped around my ankles, and I slid along the smooth stone floors of the mansion. Crystal chandeliers and Renaissance paintings streaked across my vision as I was pulled through an open doorway.

I twisted and flailed, scrabbling to clutch the doorframe to stop my relentless slide into the darkened room. I tried to make it a rule to never be forced into a room when I didn't know what lay within.

I managed a weak handhold on the doorframe, but with a sharp tug, my captor caused me to easily lose my grip. He—because only a man could own hands that large and strong—"accidentally" slammed me into a coffee table before coming to a stop without releasing me.

The concussive grenade that was triggered when I had been finishing my sweep of the last room in the mansion had left my temples throbbing, preventing me from lifting my head to get a good look at my captor. I needed to pull myself together if I was going to fight my way out of here.

Swallowing hard, I took a silent inventory of my injuries: a few bruises, no broken bones, no bleeding. Sweet. This was going to be easier than I'd thought.

**Power Surge by E.J. Whitmer:**

Blake sighed and pushed his empty plate away from him. “You called me last night at about 1:30am. The only words I could make out were ‘jaeger’ ‘nipples’ and ‘spandex’. I hopped in my car and headed over here to find you standing in your kitchen wearing only your underwear and trying to stuff your entire face in a pint of ice cream. Apparently you were out of spoons.”

That explained why I had sticky eyebrows.

I held my head in my hands and groaned as he continued. “I told you to get some pajamas on. You wanted my shirt. You took it. Thankfully you turned around while you were putting it on. I made you drink a glass of water and tucked you into bed. I wasn’t sure how much you’d had to drink, so I checked in on you every couple of hours. I provided you with early morning eye candy. I made you delicious cheesy eggs. I think that’s about it.”

I opened one eye to look at him. “Did you see my boobs?”

His face split into a panty melting grin. “No. I was a gentleman. I only gawked at your ass.”

**Emergence by Siana Wineland:**

Shivering barefoot in the darkness, Jessica hid and watched the recovery team flip lights on in her house. Panic tried to set icy claws in her gut, but she pushed it away ruthlessly. The arrival of the recovery team confirmed her worst fear: she must have started the change.

She’d done her best to deny this possibility. But reality now walked through her home, leaving her in the cold and dark.

She took a deep breath. Fear of what was to come had to take a backseat.

A large, lean man with shoulder-length blond hair entered her bedroom. He moved with the grace of a predator, her eyes widened when he turned, allowing her to see the suede of his wings fall gracefully down his back like a dark cloak.

They’ve sent a Hunter! Her mind froze in panic. Why is there a Hunter here? Recovery teams only have unchanged people in them.

The Valkyrie stopped and sniffed the air, scenting her, before walking over to the window and examining it. He spread his wings, the large fan covering the glass to block the light from behind him. Fascinated, she stared, transfixed at the way the light shone through the membrane of his wings.

She felt her mind slowing again. Fruitlessly, she fought the lethargy that was her body’s natural response to the changes taking place within it.

It wasn’t long before the Hunter’s eyes found hers, their intensity boring into her, and he smiled a slow feral smile.

**A Time Apart by Rebecca Norinne Caudill:**

As Olivia moved out of William's arms, he didn't fight her but his hands lingered as she slid away, as if he was trying to hold onto something significant, and for the first time, Olivia could see quite clearly he was no ordinary man.

"What are you?" she asked, her voice barely audible above the logs crackling in the fire.

"You know me then," was his anguished response.

How could she respond? Prior to the extensive research she'd conducted the night before, she would have sworn she had never seen him a day in her life. But that wasn't entirely true, for she knew now that she *had* seen him while she dreamed. She had seen him lying beside her, touching the most private parts of her body. And just last night she'd fantasized about making mad, passionate love to him outside, under the stars. And now she realized it had all happened before, perhaps hundreds of times. She knew this man intimately ... but not the nightmare version of him, the man who had killed her.

But more importantly, she realized, Olivia didn't know herself – that woman from a time long forgotten. "Who ... what ... am I then?" Fear and trepidation laced her voice.

"Unfortunately, I don't know much about who you are today." His voice broke with emotion. "I only know who you *were* and *when* you were. In the year 1658, you were Ceara, my fierce beauty. You were my wife and I loved you more than you can know."

William paused, waiting for her to interrupt with more questions, but when she remained mute, he continued speaking. "If asked when I was still the man you remember, I would have said I'd give anything – my life, even – for you. Instead, I took it."

As his memories drifted back hundreds of years, his face became a mask of loathing. He remembered, in starkly vivid detail, the exact moment he had chased his beloved Ceara down, broke her neck, and then sucked her body dry.

While Olivia watched him struggle through his recollections, she wondered how he could have turned on her. What had she done to deserve that fate? And who – *what* – was he that he could force these terrible memories to the surface?

"If I was ... am ... Ceara, who are you?" she asked, not quite sure she was ready to hear his answer.

"My name is William Macauley and, as you might have guessed, I'm a vampire."

### **Familiar by Frances Pauli:**

She stared at the graffiti and centered, took a deep breath and imagined her roots reaching down, down into the earth. Her head spun a little. She reached for the door with her free hand and pressed her palm against fresh red paint.

*Running through dark woods. A round moon overhead that set fear in her steps instead of awe. Why was she running again? Midnight, dogs barking behind her and the man. Her heart seized and she tripped over her own feet, sprawled forward toward hard roots and cold dirt. The man chasing her wanted blood tonight.*

"Ms. Wallace?"

Deirdre blinked and saw blood, red dribbles against white.

"Ms. Wallace, are you alright?"

Paint. She lifted her hand and stared at it. Red paint on her skin. A voice called from behind her, but it was light out. There was no moon, no danger. She turned around and found cops on her steps. The short one, she knew. Officer Peg Stone had taken her call

that morning, in fact, but Deirdre had never expected to actually see the woman. Still, there was the patrol car parked below, and behind Stone stood a policeman with dark eyes.

Deirdre's porch rippled like water. Her hand reached again, splatted against the nasty word but held her upright while the dizziness swirled around and around.

### **No More Black Magic by A.L. Kessler:**

I'd never met the Alpha, but I knew this was him. His black hair was cut short and his brown gaze cut into me. He stood tall and demanded attention. Like Simon, he was dressed in older clothes, and I assumed it meant they wouldn't care if they got ruined. The muscles of his arms were solid and his chest strained against the tight muscle shirt that he wore. Yeah, I wouldn't stand a chance in a fight against this guy, even if he was human.

Simon bowed his head. "Alpha."

"Simon, so this is her?" His eyes ran over my body and I raised a brow. I had dressed in my normal black clothes with boots. I had, as requested, left the gun in the car, but my blade was sheathed across my back, hidden by my jacket.

Simon put a hand on my back and urged me to step forward.

"I'm Abigail." I offered my hand, but Greg grabbed my wrist and jerked me forward. I caught myself with a hand against his chest.

"You are a threat to my people, you offer me the back of your neck in submission." He growled. "Do you understand that?"

I gritted my teeth and pulled my braid away from the back of my neck and bowed low enough that I offered it to him. My verbal answer wouldn't have been good enough. He was trying to show off his strength, his power, and I was willing to bet other members of the pack were watching from the windows of the cabin. Arguing with him wouldn't have done me any good.

### **Brooding City by Tom Shutt:**

"So what exactly would I do as a Sleeper? I've heard only bad things, and that was when I still thought you were just a bedtime story. If even half of it is true—"

"We do what is necessary to protect this city," Benjamin said tightly. "There are forces that are simply too powerful and mysterious to be handled by the police. We are the self-appointed protectors of the people."

"That's a great pitch, but I meant day-to-day, *what will I be doing?*"

Old Ben contemplated this question for a long moment before answering. "There is no right or wrong in this world, Jeremy. You must understand that in order to bring balance to others, we must first find balance within ourselves. This will not be an easy life, nor one filled with thanks from those you help—they will never even know you were there. You will make hard choices, decisions that will leave others bereft of their autonomy. But with my guiding hand, you will accomplish great deeds and protect countless innocents during your service."

"That still doesn't answer—"

“You will kill. You will maim. You will steal, lie, and deceive. Nobody will know who you are, or what you do, or when or where you will strike next. The people will never acknowledge your sacrifices, and they will continue to fear and despise the myth that you represent.”

There was a pregnant pause before Benjamin spoke again.

“Do you have what it takes?” he asked.

### **Altered by Amy Steaman:**

The first snowflakes of the year rode their fat bodies lazily down to the empty sidewalk Sadie Pratt trudged along. If she looked up, the old fashioned streetlights would illuminate their glittery brethren. But she didn't look up. A cold winter wind was demanding attention she didn't care to give as she shifted her eyes toward her destination at the end of the street. As if irritated with her neglect, a particularly breathy gust reached out and freed her auburn waves from a loose bun. In response, she tucked her chin deeper into the plaid scarf wrapped around her neck and quickened her footfalls.

Sadie's mood was as dark as the cloud-heavy sky hanging above her. Her boss, Harvey McDonnell, of McDonnell and Loeb Law Office had rung her out of a study-induced trance thirty minutes before.

“Sadie, I need you in the office in thirty,” like it was a common request. Like it wasn't 9:30 on a Thursday night. Like she wasn't drowning in the middle of finals!

She reached the pristine brick façade that stood with pride in the little college town of Weston's historic business district and flung the door wide. The gratuitous cowbell hanging on the handle let out its hollow ring. Harvey was already there, so instead of turning on the lights and starting a pot of coffee as per her usual routine, Sadie dumped her heavy bag without ceremony at the receptionist's desk and marched back to his office.

Harvey's watery grey eyes rose over the edge of his half-rimmed glasses to meet her steely glare then traveled down her slim frame covered in an overly long flannel, black leggings and combat boots. He chuffed. “You look nice.”

“I'll wear proper business attire during proper business hours,” she shot back, fists coming to rest on hips.

### **The Message Bearer by M.S. Dobing:**

It didn't so much as walk out of the dark - it *oozed*. Its form coalesced from the gloom, a slight shimmering in the air, a shifting of shadows, before condensing into something resembling a human that now stood, unmoving, just at the periphery of the streetlight.

Yet this was no human.

Unnaturally tall, easily touching seven feet, the thing wore a dark suit that hung loosely off a pencil-thin frame. Its head was dipped, its face hidden beneath a black fedora with a single silver band. As he watched, the creature's head rose. Black eyes met his. Something cold trickled down his spine.

It began to move forwards, its movement jerky, as if it were animated by invisible string. Its mouth opened into a wide grin, jaw distending to almost impossible

proportions, displaying a set of dagger-like incisors.

‘You see it, don’t you?’

He’d forgotten she was even there. He looked back at the woman, managing the barest of nods. She reached out to him, her hand shaking.

‘Come with me.’