

From *Everdead*

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The air was stale, thick with the taste of old heat, and yet it was so cold. There was no relief in the darkness of the alleyway. It was complete. There was no comfort, only an eerie sense of being swallowed. *This is what death feels like*, Toby thought, and shuddered. He was not disposed to such macabre imaginings, and it seemed more real—more shocking—for that reason.

“How far do you think we’ve come?” Cass asked. She was holding his hand so tightly he could feel his fingertips throbbing.

“I’m not sure. Maybe two hundred feet,” he breathed in reply. “It’s hard to tell.”

They moved deeper into the darkness with slow, uncertain steps. They used the walls of the alleyway to guide them, and the contrast of the star-sprayed sky. Toby felt his foot brush against something small and living. It moved—*bristled*—away from him. *I don’t want to know what that was*, he thought. *I don’t even want to think about it.*

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” Cass said.

“Don’t let go of my hand. We’ll be fine.” Toby wasn’t sure if he was trying to reassure Cass or himself. “This has to lead somewhere.”

But the darkness stretched on. It was endless. The alleyway turned and buckled. The walls fell away and were replaced by loose, wire fences, and then more walls, doorways, sometimes nothing at all—only emptiness that reached further than they dared. It wasn’t long before Cass and Toby became disoriented. They turned in circles. The stars couldn’t help them.

“Did we go off track?” Cass was short of breath. Nerves and fear, swelling inside her like a tidal wave.

“I don’t know. Maybe”

“And where did *he* go? We’ve lost him, haven’t we?”

We’ve lost ourselves, as well. Toby closed his eyes, trying to think, wanting to say the right thing.

“Some date, huh?” Cass nudged closer to him.

“It’s been a blast,” he said.

“Should we turn back?”

Toby turned and looked into the darkness they had walked through. It was the same as the darkness that lay ahead. “I don’t think it—” He stopped. Suddenly. Hardly breathing.

“What is it?” Cass asked.

“Did you hear that?”

In the darkness ahead of them ... somewhere in the alleyway: a dry, shifting sound.

“Oh my God, Toby. What *is* that?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t want to know.”

Another sound: a deep, throaty breathing. Like a snarl.

“It sounds like an animal,” Cass said, and shuddered. “This was a bad idea.”

“I think we should turn back.”

“I think you’re right.”

They started away, and then heard another sound, like *drinking*—a long tongue slapping at something wet. It was followed by a heavy thud: something falling to the ground.

“I’m scared, Toby.”

He recalled what she had said in the light and safety of Es Paradis: *This makes you a hero, you know*. Now, listening to those terrible feeding sounds, the idea of being a hero had lost its appeal. His skin was cold. His knees were knocking. He wanted to be at home with Nana drinking steaming hot milk with oodles of mini marshmallows. Hardly the fabric of heroes. But they were not alone. That was the truth of it. They were out here in the dark, and they were not alone.

Cass was backing away, quicker now. She was at arm’s length. Her hand slipped from Toby’s.

“Toby.”

He reached, found her in the dark, grabbed her arm, and pulled her close.

“It’s okay,” he said, but he didn’t think it was. There were more strange noises: now a kind of shivering sigh; now a dripping sound.

“Let’s go.”

“We’re going.” His voice was like cold water.

The world was suddenly filled with color: brilliant flashes of blue and green, starbursts of pink and lilac showering down like handfuls of God’s confetti. It took them a moment to realize that the bursts of light were from a fireworks display on the rooftop of a nearby club. The night was alive with rainbows and ecstatic sound. The darkness of the alleyway flickered, illuminated in fits and starts like an old movie projector whirring into life.

Cass and Toby peered hesitantly in the direction of the ominous sounds. And there, crouching no more than twenty yards away, was the vampire. His long hands were glistening, hanging like claws. His mouth was pulled into an impossible V-shape, running red.

The girl from the club lay beneath him, still shuddering. Blood sprayed from the hole in her throat. It splashed the walls and spread around her body in a black pool.

Toby’s legs buckled at the knees. He reached for the wall, needing its support to keep from falling.

Cass opened her mouth. She made a choked, clicking sound in her throat, and then managed to scream.

Luca looked up from his kill. He didn’t need the fireworks to see them. His wolf-like eyes found every detail. Their terrified, disbelieving expressions. They looked the same. Brother and sister. Hansel and Gretel. He could even see their skin prickling. He bared his vampire teeth and pointed a single spooky finger.

“Yooooooooooooooooo ...” It wasn’t a word. It was rumbling music from deep within his ribcage. A pink explosion showed him licking his lips, and then—furious, still thirsty—he went for them.

The vampire drew closer with each fabulous burst of light. Hypnotic. Terrifying. Now blue. Now orange. Now green. His face became an ever-changing mask. The girl’s blood glimmered like a mirror.

Cass and Toby were locked to the spot—paralyzed with fear—for what seemed an eternity. In real time it was less than a second, but emotion was making the world crawl. An emotion for every color in the sky:

Red/Fear: watching the monster advance.

Blue/Sadness: his victim lying broken behind him.

Orange/Anger: realizing now what had happened to Sheri.

Purple/Grief: Sheri ... *Sheri*.

White/Shock: the vampire coming at them with impossible movement.

He leapt at the wall and crawled hand over hand like a gecko. It was only when one trailing leg caught a trashcan—spilling it and him onto the alleyway floor—that the spell was broken and Cass and Toby were able to move.

“Hold my hand, Cass. Don’t let go.”

They ran.

The vampire’s cruel laughter followed them, echoing off the walls and ridiculing their escape. *I am quicker than you*, the laughter said. *You can’t get away from me*. They could hear him snarling beneath the whoop and snap of the fireworks. Cass could feel his breath on the back of her neck.

God help us. Frantic prayer. A childlike voice. She could hear herself crying. *Please, God oh please ...*

Brilliant bursts of light made the scenario more bizarre. The alleyway flashed through rainbows, showing stained glimpses: buckled fences and crumbling walls; stacked crates spewing old fruit in new color; graffitied doorways and tall windows that bloomed like ultraviolet ghosts. Toby imagined his own face drawn in pop art details: pink eyes, green lips; blue skin, yellow hair. He saw Cass’s expression in a series of wild caricatures. Her tears were rubies. Her mouth was a wet, purple splash. Toby clutched her hand tighter—ran harder. Hard breaths sizzled and popped from his lungs.

The vampire scurried along the wall beside them. A laughing, yellow thing. A scowling, red thing.

“I have you,” he whispered clearly, coldly, in Toby’s ear. He bounded across a doorway. Toby could hear his long fingernails scabbling across the face of the wall.

Cass’s tears were pink now. As bright as neon. Her eyes were startled green circles.

“Nowhere to run.”

The vampire’s shirt rippled. His teeth were curved and silver, like suture needles.

“You’re mine.”

There was a final, fantastic explosion of color—huge umbrellas opening in the darkness, battlefield sounds, shutters of light banging open and closed—and then darkness. Sudden and total.

The vampire laughed. His fingernails scratched and skittered.

“Stay with me, Cass.” Toby’s breathing was reed-thin.

They could hear people cheering and laughing. Close by. Music thumping. The sounds of safety. *So close*.

Cass felt cold fingers trail across her throat. She screamed.

“*Cass!*” Toby stumbled, staggered, lost his balance, and fell. His hand slipped out of Cass’s. The darkness swallowed her. She was lost to him.