

Strange Lake

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Chapter 1

‘I just can’t do it anymore.’

And that was that. Six months, and it still hurt. I hadn’t moved on.

I walked through the cabin as the morning light rose. The owner had dusted just before I arrived, and everything smelled of fake pine air freshener. Why they decided to cover the natural smell with the fake one, I didn’t know. Surely the point of being here was for the real pines just outside.

This was what people did, right? They retreated to a cabin in the middle of nowhere, next to a lake, in some woods. They found themselves again. They spent the last of their savings to stay away from everyone else for two weeks. Because that made perfect sense.

I dragged my bag over to the bedroom, and before I began unpacking, tested the bed. Perfect. Not too hard, not too soft. I sunk into it, and stretched out, then relaxed into the fluffy duvet.

‘Why am I here?’ I asked the empty room.

There was no response.

I sighed, the feelings of sadness threatening to come back in.

‘Well, start the week as you mean to continue, I guess, Sarah. Jeez.’

The drive had been murder. Literally. I'd hit something on the way through the woods. Just a small creature, but that had almost started the waterworks right then and there. But I'd soldiered through. I wasn't going to give up now just because of a fluffy bed.

I pushed myself off the bed and started unpacking my clothes. In honour of wanting to forget about everything else, I brought only the bare essentials. Not enough to last me the two weeks, and at some point I'd have to wash my clothes in the lake.

The cabin was beautiful. That's all I could really say. There was wood. I must have skipped the day in school where they taught you the difference between beech, oak, pine, ash, or whatever. I had never thought it mattered. There were different types of wood in the cabin, and the dresser wasn't the same as the floor, the table wasn't the same as the dresser – you get the idea. It looked haphazard, but it looked honest and real and natural.

My mobile was off and tucked away in my bag. There was no signal out here so I figured I might as well save battery. I know that a lot of people, when deciding to hide in a secluded cabin to escape from their lives, would forsake all technology. But I needed one thing.

A laptop. No internet connection, no games installed, no procrastination engines. A simple word processor. Some people are snobs and think that you need the tactility of a typewriter, the touch of mechanical keys, and artisanal paper beneath your fingertips. I say, if you need your five senses to engage your mind, then where's your imagination. This laptop was new and digital and cutting edge. It was imagination incarnate, the likes of which mankind wouldn't have thought possible only a few decades ago. Fuck typewriters.

I placed it on a desk with a window that allowed me to look out over the lake and the surrounding forest. This is where I would heal myself. This is where I would create. I would let the words flow from my mind, to my fingers, to the keys, to the pixels on the screen, and once I was done I will have transferred my pain to the page.

In theory. Writing had always been just a hobby. I enjoyed making up silly stories about hot guys and beautiful girls. Sometimes there were pirates involved. Every now and again a dragon would turn up. It had never been something... real. I never expressed my emotions through it - but hey, this was my last resort. I figured myself out now, in two weeks, or I gave up.

No pressure.

I sat down and opened a fresh document. Let the healing begin...

But first, I decided to check the fridge! The owner had said that there would be plenty of food. Enough for a month, so two weeks definitely wouldn't be an issue. He'd also said if things got

really bad, there was a hunting rifle and ammo tucked away in a closet. He'd laughed, so I hope that meant it was a joke.

Luckily, the fridge was packed full of colours and smells. Unlike wood, I knew what was going on in the fridge. I poked around a bit. Everything was fresh. Not a scrap of shrink wrapped plastic in sight. Everything was small and ripe, like it was grown from someone's backyard instead of mass produced for maximum yield to increase profits. I riffle through the drawers, finding new treasures everywhere. I pulled out a ginger root, scratching the skin off, and inhaled deeply.

'That's some good fucking ginger.'

I decided to look up some recipes online. These were the kind of ingredients you can't just throw in the pan. These deserved some respect. I was going to make the shit out of those vegetables.

My laptop pulled me back to reality.

'Oh yeah. No internet,' I muttered.

The food could wait. It was time to create. Something short to start with. Quick and easy, just to get me warmed up. I wrote something about a young girl, an outcast, different from everyone around her. A vampire, because vampires are cool, and I wanted her to be cool. But because she was a vampire, someone wanted her dead. Obviously. But what was the hook? She loved the vampire hunter's son. Boom. Short story done. Instant number one bestseller, guaranteed.

I was just about to write the scene where the heroine discovers her own powers, when a knock on the door made me jump and let out a little cry.

I giggled to myself as the shot of adrenaline buzzed through me and I headed to the front door. Without hesitation, I opened it. I mean, I was in a secluded cabin in the middle of nowhere. Why wouldn't I open the door for a random person.

'Hello, Miss.' The man said with a smile. He was a big, bear of a man. Early forties, perhaps, with a shaved head, but a greying beard that made up for his lack of hair up top. 'You can call me Lou.'

'Oh, hey Lou. Nice to meet you. Sarah's fine.'

'Nice to meet you.'

We shook hands, and he was clearly brought up with the foundation that a firm handshake should be given to everyone. Even women half his size and age, that struggle with opening jars. I managed to not shake the pain out of my hand once he'd released it.

'Do you want to co—' I started to invite him in.

‘No thank you, Miss,’ he interrupted. ‘You rented the cabin from me, so far as I’m concerned, I have no right to it till you leave. Your privacy is your own. Bit of an unspoken rule, but I’ll speak it for you – any meetings with the locals, have outside on the porch.’

I pointed to the desk by the window. ‘Don’t worry, not getting up to anything weird.’

‘Not yet,’ he grumbled. ‘Folk from the city tend to get bored and start doing *things*, after a few days.’

‘Riiiiight.’

‘Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you’d found everything all right?’

‘Yeah, it all seems to be here, just as advertised, I guess.’

He nodded, then started counting on his fingers. ‘All cleaned and dusted for you, fridge stocked, generator running, wood stack ready for chopping, and the gun just in case.’

I ticked my own fingers off. ‘Lack of dust was noticeable, the fridge is divine, what the hell’s a generator, fire sounds awesome but didn’t realise I’d be chopping the wood myself, and what is this, Chekov’s Gun?’

His kind eyes turned dead serious as they locked with mine ‘Check-who? No, Miss, no commies up here, that’s for sure.’ After an awkward second, he laughed. ‘I’m just teasing you, Miss. If you’ve got time, I’ll show you the generator. It’s just out back next to the wood pile.’

‘Lou, I’ve got nothing but time.’

He nodded behind me. ‘But first, the gun’s in that room there. Cleaning supplies too, if that’s your thing.’ I eyes him suspiciously, and he threw his hands up in defence. ‘Some people like cleaning, Miss. Didn’t mean it in *that* way. We’re equal opportunity up here. If you can cut wood, you cut wood. I’ve known plenty of ladies than can skin a deer faster than I can.’

He took me round the back of the cabin and showed me a blue engine looking thing. It was all new and modern, and if it stopped working for some reason, make sure it was topped up, then push the start button. He showed me where the axe was for wood chopping. He handed it to me, and I made a valiant effort to not drop it, and just about succeeded.

‘Not to worry, Miss,’ he chuckled. ‘I’m sure I can find a bit of time to cut a few logs for you. Just to get you started, of course.’

‘Of course,’ I groaned just before he took the axe back from me single handed, as if it didn’t weigh half my bodyweight.

‘That’s about it, Miss. I’ll come back in a week, make sure everything’s okay. Bring over some perishables, if you need, but otherwise, I’m out of your hair from now.’

‘Aww, Lou, my hair will miss you.’

He frowned, not quite getting me, it would seem. He pointed round the lake to the right. 'That there's my cabin. I'm your neighbour, but I'm a few miles off. So again, privacy is all yours if you want to blast some music, or whatnot. If you need anything, you'll have to make the walk, I'm afraid. No phones out here, as I'd said in our emails.'

'Sounds good.' This was what I'd wanted. To find myself. 'Wait, if there's no internet then how'd you send emails?'

'I drive to the nearest town once a week. Got to keep the cabin renting business alive.' He smiled at me.

We said our goodbyes, and I went back into the cabin. It was just past midday, and I decided that I deserved a nap after my long drive and a morning of gushing my creative juices.

Chapter 2

I woke up and it was dark. The bed felt much harder than it had when I'd collapsed in it. Shit. So much for taking a "nap". The noises of the forest night were loud. Much louder than I'd expected. It almost made me wish for the peace and quiet of rush hour traffic right outside my window. A breeze blew strands of hair across my face.

The haze cleared, and I jerked up. I was lying on the ground in the middle of the forest. I jumped to my feet, and fear set in. How had I gotten here?

The next thing I noticed was the cold biting my skin. I started shaking. It shouldn't have been cold enough to seriously hurt me, but... I didn't know how long I'd been outside, or what had happened to me before I left the cabin or... I was wearing a white, almost see through dress. I own, let alone bring with me to the cabin, a white, almost see through dress.

I wrapped my arms around my body, and my shaking intensified. I wasn't wearing underwear either. What the fuck happened?

I saw a light in the distance. It was my only point of reference in the otherwise dark forest, so I moved towards it. And discovered I wasn't wearing shoes. Fuck. Every step hurt as the forest floor, which looked like it was covered in soft leaves and supple dirt, turned out to be covered in sticks and stones.

It was as if the light was moving away from me as I closed in on it. Like a dream where you're running but can never actually reach your goal. Or get away from whatever's chasing you. After what felt like hours of painful walking, but was probably only a few minutes of cold, painful stumbling, I stopped.

My feet felt like they were cut up something bad, but it was too dark to tell. My shiver had turned into a full on dance as I couldn't keep my limbs from shaking like leaves in the wind, and my teeth were chattering together loud enough that I couldn't hear the bugs squealing in the night anymore.

I placed a hand against a tree to steady myself, to rest for a moment before I continued, but my arm caved under my weight, and I fell to the floor, grazing my ribs against the rough bark on the way down.

It was too much. I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know where I was. I didn't know anything. And I still couldn't have him back. I came here to forget, not to... whatever the fuck this was.

I cried. I couldn't stop myself. Tears poured from my eyes, and I gasped in air so that I could sob some more, and it was horrible. I hadn't felt this hopeless since he left me.

'Fuck,' I mumbled.

'Fuck it, what's the point,' I sobbed, getting louder.

'What the fuck happened to me,' I asked the cold night between my shaking teeth.

'Fuck!' I screamed at the night, and at my life.

The night returned a howl.

'Brilliant. Fucking wolves. Of course there are.' I'd gone back to a mutter now. I was feeling tired. I was so cold, I might as well sleep until morning when it would be warmer. I let my eyes slip closed, the small speck of light in the distance was the last thing I saw.

'Hello?' A voice shouted against my closed eyes. 'Somebody out there?'

"Somebody". Like I was already just a body. Already dead. I giggled at the thought.

'Where are you?' The voice shouted again.

Already dead. Was that what I wanted? It was the easy option. Just keep my eyes closed. The voice in the night would give up and go away. Assume the voice he'd heard was just a whisper of the wind through the trees.

'I'm here.' I said.

Fuck no, I didn't want to die. Let what everyone thought about me, that I couldn't go on without him, be true. I'd come to this cabin to find myself. To rediscover my life. So I'd do just fucking that.

'I'm here!' I shouted.

'Sarah? Is that you?'

Lou. Fucking Lou, my saviour. 'Lou. It's Sarah!'

'Keep talking. I'll come get you.'

I saw a flashlight turn on and start scouring the woods. It didn't take long for him to find me. He scooped me up in his arms, making me feel like a child being picked up by her dad. He was warm. So warm. I nuzzled my head into his chest, and let him carry me, knowing, *knowing* that he'd make it okay.

'Hey,' his gruff voice barked in my ear. 'Stay awake. The cabin's just here.'

I mumbled something incoherent even to myself. He shook me.

‘Warm,’ I said. ‘I want to be warm.’

He took the steps to his cabin and was about to open the door when he stopped. He put me in a chair on his porch and went inside. I wanted to be inside – in the warmth. After a few seconds he came back out with arms filled with blankets and started wrapping me up in them.

‘Inside,’ I said.

He shook his head. ‘I’ll keep you warm out here...’ he seemed to realise what he was saying. And for the first time I saw him look unsure. He took a good long time looking around. I could tell he didn’t want to be disturbed, so I just got on with shivering.

He cursed under his breath. He picked me up and took me inside.

The lights hurt my eyes, but the warmth instantly began soothing my pain.

He placed me at his hearth, in front of the fire. I tried to curl up into a ball and let sleep take me, but he stopped me and laid me out. He pulled the blankets off me and asked, ‘Where does it hurt?’

‘Everywhere.’

‘Be specific, Sarah. Where hurts the most.’

‘Feet.’

I felt naked before his stare. Probably because I basically was, which brought me back to the uncomfortable question of why I was wearing a dress I didn’t own and nothing else.

He examined my feet.

‘I bet you weren’t expecting to see me again so soon.’ I giggled. It wasn’t funny, but I wasn’t exactly thinking straight.

He grunted. ‘I was going to come by tomorrow. Make sure you had enough food.’

Something in my brain clicked. He only did that after a week. I tried to sit up, but his hand was instantly on my shoulder, keeping me down.

‘Lou. Crazy question, but when did I last see you?’

He grunted. ‘Week ago.’

I clamped my eyes shut but could feel the tears escaping from them immediately. ‘Lou. What happened to me?’

‘You’ve cut your feet pretty bad. Don’t look at them, it’ll just make it worse.’

I opened my eyes and saw his face. Luckily, my tears weren’t blurring my vision. He was inspecting me. His eyes caressed my face as a whole, then focused on my eyes, and my lips, then my neck.

‘How do you feel?’ He asked.

‘Scared.’

He nodded. I heard the howl of a wolf from outside once again.

‘There’s no need to be.’ He paused and looked around his room, then sighed. ‘I’m going to get a doctor. You’re safe now. This fire will keep you warm. You can sleep, okay Sarah?’

I nodded. Sleep sounded like a great idea. In sleep, I wouldn’t have so many questions.

He covered me in blankets again, grabbed his coat, and walked out, locking the door behind him. The room suddenly felt so empty. It was just the crackling of the fire and myself. It cracked and popped, and lulled me from consciousness.

I shook my head against the sleep. Going to sleep is what had caused all this in the first place. I had just wanted a stupid nap. Christ. He’d said I’d hurt my feet. I pulled off multiple blankets. I sat up, feeling dizzy and sick. I looked down, feeling stupid in this white dress, but there was no blood on the blankets. Using everything I had left in me, I curled one of my feet up towards myself to inspect the damage. It was there, all right, Lou hadn’t been lying. Large cuts made the soles of my feet look like ribbons. But the flesh was pale white. Not a single drop of blood. I wracked my brain for something that could do that. Maybe a certain drug would account for the memory loss – an entire fucking week – and no blood in my extremities. That could be a thing, right?

I lay back down, and pulled the blankets back over myself.

Keep yourself together, Sarah.

I just wanted to call him. He’d know what to do. But he’d left me. I hadn’t been ready for him to leave me. It had come out of nowhere - no reason, nothing. Just one morning, I woke up to find a note on the table, and he was gone.

Keep yourself together, Sarah.

Chapter 3

I drifted in and out of, not sleep, but focus. Time moved, and I stood still. At some point a key slipped into the lock, and the door opened. Lou stepped in, and moved to the side, allowing someone else to look in.

I was out of it, so I wasn't sure what I was seeing, but this new person looked... odd. One second he looked angelic, with soft features and big, round eyes. The next, he was a demon, with sharp cheekbones, and a sinister stare. Whatever was happening to my body, presumably shock from the week of *whatever*, was making me see things.

'Well?' Lou asked.

'In the woods? You're sure?' The stranger replied. Like his face, his voice was from here and nowhere at the same time. The accent was on the tip of my tongue, but I knew I'd never be able to guess it.

'I found her crying just behind my cabin.'

The stranger stayed outside the cabin, peering in. 'You guys really do take this privacy thing strict,' I said.

They both frowned at me, then shrugged at each other, continuing to swap cryptic phrases that sounded like they were two spies meeting across a park bench with phrases like "Did the grey wolf arrive", and "The white bat will hear of this". Annoying, but I suspected that I was too out of it for anything I tried to say to actually come out as words.

'Well she can't stay here,' Lou said.

The other man nodded. 'No, of course.'

Silence. Looks and gestures were exchanged. Options and suggestions that they couldn't bring themselves to say out loud.

'Not going to happen,' Lou said.

The stranger sighed. 'I will take her.'

Without anyone consulting me, I was scooped up again, and exchanged from Lou to the stranger after Lou had taken me outside the cabin.

'And bring those blankets back,' Lou said, but then thought better of it. 'Actually, buy me fresh ones.'

Then Lou slammed the door. I heard him lock it.

The stranger looked down at me. He wasn't nearly as tall or wide as Lou, but he still held me like I weighed nothing. He didn't say anything, and instead headed off, following the lake to the right, taking me further away from the cabins.

'Hi,' I said. 'I'm Sarah Strange.'

'Hello, Sarah Strange.'

I waited a few seconds. 'And what's your name?'

He was silent.

'Well, you seem strong. I know I'm not a giant, but I don't seem to even be slowing your stride. So I'll call you Conan till you give me your name, okay?'

He stayed silent. Lou had trusted him enough to hand me over, but... fear started creeping back inside me.

'Where are you taking me?'

'Home.'

'Not my home,' I muttered.

He was quiet for a time, before saying, 'That's yet to be seen. And that's a stupid name. Call me Uther.'

'Uther? That's from—'

'Germany.'

'Hmm. You don't sound very German.'

'I haven't lived there for a long time.'

'Uther. Do you know what happened to me?'

He continued his relentless march along the lake. Now that the trees weren't blocking the sky, I could see the stars and their reflection on the lake, and everything looked a lot more peaceful than it had an hour ago.

'Lou told me what happened.'

'I mean... I've been here a week, and I don't remember it. Do you know? Can you help me? Is that why Lou called you?'

He shushed me. A slow, gentle shush. I'm not going to say that I liked being shushed, but I could tell he meant it to be soothing, not nasty.

'Yes, Sarah Strange.'

'Wait. I asked a lot of questions. Yes to which ones?'

He looked down at me for the first time since he'd spoken to me. It was too dark to really see what he looked like. 'To all of your questions. I do know, I *can* help you if I so choose, and that is why Lou called me.'

'Please, Uther, what happened in the week—'

'That can all wait. For now, *sleep*.'

Chapter 4

I was rudely awoken by stomach cramping up a God damned storm. Once it had calmed down, I looked around.

A modest room. If you were a king! Christ, this place was huge. It was like someone took a normal sized house, hollowed it out, and called it a bedroom. The walls were a dark wood panelling, covered in curtains and drapes of all sorts, reds overlapping golds, and blues peeking out behind both of them - so many it almost looked like I was inside a tent. It made everything seem dark and muffled.

There were candles all round the room, burning brightly.

I sat up. Apart from my stomach, I was fine. I groaned as I remembered what had happened. It's possible I hadn't ate in an entire week. I didn't know, but it certainly felt like that.

The loud thump of a book closing just to my right made me jump out of bed and fall on the floor, dragging the blankets with me.

I looked over the bed to see a man sat in a chair. Sure enough, his book was closed now. It wasn't that guy from before. What had his name been? I was so out of it, I couldn't remember.

The man in the chair sighed. He took his glasses off and placed them on the bedside table. He tapped his fingers on the thigh of his crossed legs. 'We have a problem.'

'What the fuck?'

He rolled his eyes. 'Eloquently put, my dear.'

I got to my feet and stood up. I was pissed off. I didn't care that weird shit was going on, I wanted someone to stop fucking around and explain things. And to not close books very loudly when someone had just woken up!

'Listen, asshole, I don't care who you are or why you're here.' I pointed a finger at him. 'Tell me what the hell is going on. Right now!'

He coughed politely and looked down at me. I followed his gaze. Apparently, someone had decided that the white dress I'd been found in was a bit of a fashion faux pas, that bare skin was preferable. How absolutely mortifying. I felt my cheeks flush, but I'd committed to this interrogation and had to stick to it. Play it cool, Sarah, play it cool. 'What? Never seen a naked woman before?'

He smiled and shrugged. 'As I said, what is going on here, is that we have a problem.'

Hands on hips, legs spread in a dominating stance that no doubt made me look a bit ridiculous as I was still naked, I commanded, 'Elaborate.'

His body jerked in a silent laugh. 'Very well. Let's go for a walk, shall we?' I was about to complain but he cut me off with a held up hand. 'And I'll explain everything.'

'Okay. But first—'

He pointed to a dresser. 'Clothes are in there. I'll be just outside the door.'

He left. Once the door clicked shut, I collapsed onto the bed and couldn't stop myself from laughing. It was the kind of laughter that you had to do, or you'd die from embarrassment.

'I've never looked more ridiculous,' I whispered to myself.

After taking a moment to compose myself, I checked the dresser. I rummaged around in it. 'What the...?' It had the most bizarre collection. Firstly, there was no underwear, so that was odd. Secondly, all the clothes looked like they were from a period tv film set. Nothing but ridiculous satin dresses. Well, it was cold outside at night, so I guess it made sense that there no summer dresses. Would a single pair of jeans or yoga pants have killed them, though?

I put on the least offensive thing I could find. An emerald green dress with so many underskirts I felt trapped. If there had been a mirror to check, I was positive the colour wouldn't have worked with my skin tone, but my hair would have been okay. If I'd had a bath in the last week, which it didn't feel like I had. And the way it sagged from my shoulders, boobs, and hips made it clear it was for a woman bigger than myself.

Oh well, nothing I could do about it now, and this was all my captors had given me. Captors or saviours. I wasn't sure yet.

But what choice did I have? Escape? Where to? I guessed I was within walking distance from Lou's, but that guy could have put me in a car and driven for hours. Even if I was by the lake, it would still be miles till I found my car by my cabin.

So I left the giant bedroom wearing a weird dress.

'I thought you looked rather fetching, actually,' the book closing man said.

'Uhh, what?'

'You didn't look ridiculous at all.'

It was lighter out here, with actual electric lights instead of candles. He was wearing a navy blue, three piece suit. He had brown hair, cut short against his head. His face was all high cheekbones, narrow and... predatory.

My brain took a moment to process what he'd said. I'd whispered it. 'Good hearing. Now let's talk.'

He pushed himself off from the wall, and started down a corridor, not checking to see if I followed.

‘Would you like the long version, or the short, my dear?’

‘Give me the cliff notes.’

The hall was well lit, but still dark and brooding thanks to the wooden walls - now without drapes to cover them - and the red carpet floor. The plush carpet beneath my feet felt soothing and warm. It also made me realise I’d forgotten to put shoes on. Oops.

‘You’re still on the shore of the lake, but this is the far side from the man you know as Lou. The master of this mansion has gone to find out what happened to you last week, and ultimately whose responsibility you are. He instructed me to make sure you don’t hurt yourself.’

Still on the lake. Okay, well that was good to know at least. And at least someone is interested in what the hell happened during the week I forgot. ‘Hurt myself? I’m not a child.’

‘Oh. How old are you?’

‘Twenty seven.’

‘You might as well be, then.’

Something told me I should stand my ground against whoever this guy was. ‘Hey, buddy. I’ve had my share of hard times. Don’t be a dick.’

He stopped walking and turned to me, his face neutral. Then he smiled bright white teeth, and said, ‘Such hard times, indeed? Clearly, I misspoke. I bow to your twenty seven years of expertise.’ Yes, he did the mocking bow to go with that.

We walked further, and the long corridor opened out into a huge reception hall, with looming gates like you might find on a European castle taking up the far side of the room.

‘So, no one knows what happened to me? Last week?’

‘Not yet. But if anyone can find out, it’s Uther.’

Uther... yes, the guy Lou had handed me to. The man whose face I couldn’t remember as it seemed to shift in the night. But that must have been my fear or something. The whole of last night was a blur. I remembered my feet. They’d been ruined. I quickly looked at the soles of my feet and they looked normal. The mind does weird things, I guess.

‘Okay, so... what now ‘Am I your prisoner?’ I asked mockingly. But also, kind of genuinely wondering.

He smirked. ‘You’re a prisoner, no doubt about that. But you can leave anytime you want.’

‘Umm, I think that’s the exact opposite of being a prisoner.’

He pointed at the large castle doors. ‘Any time you want to see what I mean, be my guest.’

Looking at the giant doors, I doubted I could open them. I frowned. 'You're buckets of help, aren't you?'

'Not making a run for it? Very well, let's take a seat.' He walked over to a side room that was filled with chairs and tables the perfect height to hit your shins on in the night. As we walked in the lights turned on automatically. Despite all the olde timey feel and decor, they'd still installed movement sensors into their lights.

He took a seat at one end of a couch. I went to sit in a big chair, but he jumped to his feet. 'Not that one.'

I mouthed a silent 'Okay,' and sat on the other end of his couch - after trying to move enough skirts, underskirts, secondary skirts, tertiary skirts, whatever the hell was going on with this dress, out of my way to sit down.

'So... man that was sat next to me while I slept, tell me what this "problem" of ours is.'

He eyed me for a moment, and crossed his legs. Now that I had a chance to look at him properly, he was a handsome looking guy. I'd been too rushed, and kind of terrified, before to notice, but he had a square jaw, piercing blue eyes, and despite what could have been a disaster of a hairstyle on some, pulled off the slick backed hair with grace. His suit was immaculate, although I didn't know why he was wearing it - I didn't imagine there were many business meetings on a lake. But then I didn't imagine there was a giant mansion/castle hybrid on a lake either, so what did I know.

'Our problem, is you.'

I threw my hands up in exasperation. 'The boat has kind of sailed on that, so be more specific.'

'I'm afraid I can't. Until Uther returns, we simply don't know what you are.'

'What I am? Like I'm an object?'

He mulled this over for a moment. 'Yes. "What" is the correct word.'

I crossed my arms. 'You're being a dick.'

He nodded and shifted uncomfortably. 'I've never had to do *this* before..'

'Huh?'

I rolled his head as if loosening muscles and pent up aggression. 'Uther know how to... anyway. Sarah, that's your name, yes?'

I nodded. 'Sarah Strange.'

'Really? Strange is a name?'

I shrugged. 'Blame my parents, I dunno.'

‘Right. Sarah Strange. Something happened to you... no, no. Ignore that.’ He ran his hand through his hair. ‘Sarah. You’ve lived a very sheltered life. Until now.’

I frowned. ‘All right, I guess. I mean—’

‘Don’t interrupt.’

I threw my hands up again, and leaned back into the couch. He was clearly struggling with building up to something, but I couldn’t even guess what.

‘Most people live their whole lives never discovering the truth about the world. And that suits everyone just fine. They don’t interfere with us, and we are given free reign among the innocent little lambs. You, however, are about to learn the truth. It’s not something that we take lightly, bringing a new member into the fold, but unfortunately, some of our lower brethren couldn’t hold themselves back.’

I kept glaring at him. He was rambling, and it felt like he was going to induct me into some weird gentleman’s club or something. ‘I’m not saying time is of the essence, but we are all dying. In a general sense, you know, so maybe—’

‘I said don’t interrupt. Us higher... no, no. You’ll learn in time that there’s no malice behind us, any more so than a lion killing a gazelle. It’s how nature intended. We take what we must. We’re not evil. Not all of us, at least. We have urges, but they can be controlled. There’s no need to fear us, or to fear yourself. In fact, you now have many gifts bestowed upon you—’

He looked so calm and collected before, but now he was fidgeting, clearly nervous, and I still had no idea what he was trying to tell me. ‘Wake me up when you get to a point, okay?’

He slammed his fist into the armrest, and I heard the wood crack. ‘Vampires, okay?! We’re fucking vampires! God, you’re annoying.’

I didn’t react. I didn’t know if this was all a joke, or what, but suddenly my suspicions were up. First a missing week, now some hot looking guy claims vampires exist. That I’m one of them? ‘No,’ I said.

His face changed from annoyed to confused. ‘What do you mean no?’

‘You’re lying. Doesn’t make any sense.’

‘Wha— you can’t just say “no” and magically have facts not be facts. That doesn’t make any... ohh. No, no, that’s fine. This is the denial phase. It’s true, Sarah.’

‘Don’t “denial phase” me, buddy. There’s no five stages of grief here. You’re just lying.’

‘You want proof? Easy. Take myself for example. I was born in the seventeenth century. Uther found me, and—’

‘You’re a twenty first century weirdo.’

Annoyance flashed across his face. He pointed to the armrest he'd broken. 'Look. Supernatural strength.'

'Woodworm.'

'You're hungry, aren't you? Very hungry. You need to feed.'

'Yes, I am. I want some damn carbs though. Who thinks they're hungry and automatically jumps to the conclusion that they need to kill a person and drain their body of blood. Ridiculous!'

'That's not... okay, yes that's a bit of a jump. But vampires are real.'

'Bad cosplays are real.'

He clenched his fists, clearly getting frustrated. He took a deep breath, and leaned back in the couch. 'In which case, Sarah, let's try some real proof, shall we? Proof that you can't deny.'

'You said I'm a vampire, right? Okay, then tell me about my new dark, bloody powers. Go on.'

'No, no. You don't have them yet. I'll do the proving.'

'Right, so I'm a vampire, but I don't have any powers. A weak ass story, buddy.'

He took another deep breath.

'See, you're even breathing. I thought vampires were dead so didn't have to breathe.'

He took *another* deep breath. I might have been pissing him off, but I wasn't going to let someone just pretend to be a vampire. It was weird.

'Breathing is an affectation. Something left behind from my life as a human. It takes a surprisingly long time for the body to realise that it doesn't need to breathe. Your heart still beats, for example. Mine stopped sometime in the second century of my life as a vampire.'

'My heart still beats. How convenient for you. Come on, why are you trying to prank me into thinking I'm dead. What's the point? Vampire that seems to be completely human? Bit unrealistic, don't you think?'

'That will continue until you first feed, yes. And there's no "prank" here.' He slapped his knees and stood up. 'Follow me. I'll give you your proof.'

'Pfft. This ought to be good.'

He walked past me back to the giant doors, and pointed. 'Outside. Hollywood got it right, Sarah, sunlight burns us. It doesn't kill, but it burns. Outside, it's daytime.'

I looked at him skeptically. I tapped my foot. Then I gave in and looked around the room. I had assumed it was night because all the lights were on, but actually there were no windows. Okay, he had me there. But this prank, which was becoming more elaborate by the minute, was very well thought out. There was, however, one easy way to sort this out. I didn't really want to say it, but... it would end this.

‘Open it.’

His brow creased. ‘I just said it would burn us. But you want me to open it? Just to be clear.’

‘Come on, buddy. Let’s get this over with. Put your money where your mouth is.’

He clenched his fists, clearly annoyed, but assented. He turned and started unbolting the door. It occurred to me just then that not much good could come of this. If this was a prank, then I’d have just ended it, and quite what someone who would go to these lengths for a prank would do to someone once it ended.... Best not to dwell on that. If it wasn’t a prank then I was a vampire. Whatever.

A bolt slid back into the wall, and the man grabbed the giant iron ring. He began to pull. For a moment nothing happened, but then a loud screech hit my ears. I could have mistaken it for bats hissing if it hadn’t been incredibly obvious that it was the hinges of the door. All this vampire talk had me jumpy, clearly.

And then it was done. He hadn’t pulled the door wide open, in fact he’d barely opened it enough to get a finger through. Because all the lights were on inside, there wasn’t even a super cool looking beam of light piercing the darkness.

We were both stood out of the sunlight, behind the door.

‘Well, go on then,’ I said.

‘What? You were the one that wanted proof, you stick your hand in the sunlight.’

I hesitated. I mean, I definitely wasn’t a vampire, so it didn’t matter, but... Oh screw it, it’s just the sun. It was time to get this over with. I jabbed my hand into the sunbeam and exactly as I expected... you know how it takes a second or two before your skin decides if something is too hot or too cold? It can’t quite figure it out, it just knows that there is one extreme or the other currently happening to your skin.

This was both, and it was instant. Pain flared through my hand, shooting up my arm and into my shoulder. I jumped back, falling to the floor, and clutching my hand to my chest. I could feel the burn and the blistering and the holy shit fuck pain.

His hands pressed my shoulders into the ground to stop me from rolling.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said in soothing tones that broke through my panic. ‘You’ll be fine. The exposure was minimal, and you’re not fully turned. It would have hurt me a lot more than you if I’d done that.’

I looked down at my hand, and the skin was red and blistered. The pain ebbed, and faded, and within a few seconds was gone. Before my eyes, the skin began to return to its normal colour, and the blisters shrank.

I looked up into his eyes. 'What's your name?'

'Isaac.'

'Well, shit, Isaac. I'm a fucking vampire.'