

Excerpt from *Eve's Descendants: Hindsight*

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She usually loved December because it meant time in the water.

It had been the first night of practice. A few days before Christmas Break; she beat Tyler Richardson in the 100-meter freestyle.

He challenged her. She beat him. The taunting from his friends flashed anger across his face, but Leah thought nothing of it.

Now, as she limped further along the lockers, water seeping through her sweatshirt and jeans, her hair still dripping from the ill-fated match, she

thought about killing Tyler.

Ye shall not eat of it . . .

Eat: to digest, consume. Eat. Nor touch. Eat. Touch. Taste—

The words burst wholly open, melding themselves, fastening their weight into the labyrinth of her brain before her vision blurred and two tiny lightning bugs flew near her, bouncing from her cheek to her nose, then diving in and out of the tiny slits of the nearby lockers.

Breathing deeply, the two tiny lights she saw flying around filled her with indescribable warmth. Somehow, she was overwhelmed with memories, letting herself recall their mutual friends, Kumo and Shawn—the ones doing the taunting—their shared classes, anything she could to spare Tyler. After all, she was no murderer.

Instead, she fled from the horror not sticking around to see Tyler's natural creamy hue return as he got to his feet and staggered to the men's locker room door.

Three days later, the police found Tyler Richardson. Well, parts of him were found. According to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, whoever killed him took their time to shred him to pieces.

Later that week was when she first saw him parked in a midnight blue BMW a couple of houses down from Nanna's house. Although she couldn't see his face, she could feel his gaze. There was something frightening about not being able to see him clearly. He was like the guy in her nightmares. Someone she always knew was there, watching. But his face was a vast haze, a dark abyss. Even when he was close to her he was never clearly outlined.

Something in his stare chilled her to her core. But even he couldn't have worried her like the threat of Tyler coming back.

Fortunately, someone had already rid the world of that filth.

The rest of December and January whizzed by without another thought.

Catching a glimpse of the dark circles beneath her eyes, Leah bent over the sink,

deep breathing. Each morning, this feeling grew with an intensity she couldn't name. Her mother's face, her dark skin, her father's caramel eyes, his determined gaze—but somehow less—staring back at her.

She stood there, growing frantic by the second until her hands gripped the rust-stained sink. Her tears were hot and heavy; so she struggled, gulping back until her throat burned, her chest tightened.

Just then, her cell phone buzzed. She let go of the sink and forced herself to regain control.

Sniffing, she said, "Hi, Aunt Cass."

"Hey, it's my favorite niece."

Leah was silent, swallowing back the bitterness that threatened to creep out of her.

"So what are you doing?"

You're the psychic. You tell me, she thought hotly. "Just getting ready for school," she said hoarsely.

"Uh huh. How's Mom?"

If Cassandra wanted restraint, she shouldn't have asked that.

"You'd know if you came by to see her some time. You know . . . like normal daughters do."

"Leah, you know my life's here," Cass exclaimed. "I mean . . . Italy. It's so . . ."

"Yeah. I know," Leah whispered beginning to tune her out. After a long pause she said, "Look I gotta go."

"Wait. Wait. Why can't you ever just talk to me?"

Hmph.

"So how's Su?"

"SSDD." Jeez! I've been around Su for too long, Leah mused.

"SSDD? Oh. Same stuff different day. I got it." But when Cassandra asked about David, she could tell that Leah was silently cringing. "Oh. I see," she paused. Then added, "well, stop being so mean to him," she chuckled.

Although Leah did have a tendency to treat David worse than anyone else, she didn't feel like hearing advice from an aunt she hadn't seen since her father's funeral two years ago. "Whatever," she mumbled and slammed the phone shut. So what if her own family were too busy to visit her, or even call her.

Besides, it was time to enter her bubble. Now that the tears were out of the way, she could focus on her impenetrable sphere. There, she could pretend to be complacent with her parents' death and her only aunt's neglect. She was used to taking care of herself. Because her mom died when she was thirteen, she took it upon herself to make sure that she and her dad had something edible when he came home from work, made sure that Nanna was clean and taken care of, as well as the house. Now that her dad was gone, the emptiness was a gulf that could never be filled. So at school, it was her utmost concern to appear to be "well-adjusted." Normal. Otherwise, Ms. Brody, the school counselor, would interfere with her too-friendly hugs and Snickers-bar sessions in her office. As long as Leah occasionally smiled, seemed to be involved with her peers, and kept up her grades, there was no need for Ms. Brody to schedule a stat behavioral-and-candy intervention. Every morning after her tear session,

she'd dissolve her cares into her bubble before her concerns disappeared altogether.

By blending in, not being a pest, Ms. Brody left her to her own devices. She still recommended drugs like Xanax and Zoloft, from time to time. Disappearing into her bubble and denial, of course, became tools for numbing Leah.

She also took clues from her dad. As a history professor, he already immersed himself in his findings. After her mother passed, he drowned himself in ancient artifacts, significant dates, and what runs rampant throughout history, wars. Coming out of his room to sit in the dining room with Leah, book propped open in front of him, he wasn't there. Researching and writing. Researching and writing.

His appearance was haggard; his cornstalk hair grayed fast, and he was easily distracted and irritable. When Leah thought about it, her dad was lost to minute facts and irrelevant materials, which were great for his students and publisher. With them, he had something to strive for.

Still, she gained nothing from this. Because her father had caved in on himself, she began to long for the days where he was animated, livid, mad as he raved on parroting talk of the end of the world and something Leah had to do with it all, and the grand scheme which included her doing something big. Thus, she was forced to practice with the dummy in the basement until he was satisfied that her fighting form was doable while her mother watched on with contempt. She recalled that her mother often seemed baffled with Phillip's rants and Leah's own compliance. So much so Leah was sure that her mother was dissatisfied with Phillip, with her, and with her own life.

To avoid further scrutiny, to avoid the pangs that gripped her chest often when she longed for her parents, she mimicked her father. She, too, consumed herself with her homework, swimming, volunteer services, anything. Being out all day made the days pass quickly, the nights fed by exhaustion and fear moved even faster. And so time sped achingly on. But pass it did.

There was no time to feel anything, which was exactly how Leah needed it to be.

Unfortunately, there was always something still lurking in the recesses of her mind: hope. She was still here and she felt her parents' presence in her bubble.

Glancing at her watch now, she crept lightly on the oak floors to avoid waking Darlene who slept in the guest bedroom just steps away from the main hall bathroom. In Nanna's room, the smell of cat urine and mothballs wafted through the stale air as she pushed the door open. The warmth of the day seeped in through the bottom of the old window pane.

"It's just me, Nanna," Leah stated for Whisper—the gray-striped cat purring beneath Nanna's bed—more than she did for Nanna.

When Nanna stirred, she stared right through Leah. She smiled, vaguely, not remembering any of the times she and Leah spent watching those rowing on Schuylkill River, or the times at Fairmount Park, or the days she took Leah to the Franklin Institute or the Museum of Natural Science where she let one of the guides prop a snake around Leah's shoulders expecting her to freak out like the other kids. Instead, she seemed naturally attuned and in command of the creature, as if daring it to slither or strike her. Nor could Nanna remember the photo she'd taken of Leah, her son, Phillip, and her daughter-in-law, Lily. It