



The Blood That Flows

How sweet
is your blood?

Stephanie Van Orman

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*Dedicated to someone very important to me.
They know who they are, but perhaps it's better if all of you don't know.*

The Blood that Flows

A Novel

By Stephanie Van Orman

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Chapter One

Not Just a Bubblegum Girl

“A vampire goes through four phases in its development. One of you two must be able to tell me about them,” Detective Marshall said gruffly. He looked from Dudley to me, like he was expecting us to raise our hands.

Neither one of us moved. Why should we? This wasn’t bloody school. We were sitting on mismatched chairs in his cramped office, which smelled of tobacco and old French fries. A pile of paper was on the verge of sliding onto the floor from the top of Marshall’s filing cabinet and I suspected a wad of gum ground into the carpet was stuck to my shoe.

Marshall just enjoyed talking like this. A former police chief in some distant city before he’d resigned and moved here to lay down the law about vampires—which would have worked, except here the Chief of Police, Pierce Wagner, was a closet bloodsucker. With Marshall’s passion for slaying vampires, it was impossible for him to work with police who sympathized with the undead. So, now he worked as a detective for the masses of humans who hadn’t quite got the memo. This was a vampire city.

Me? Yeah, I got the memo. I got it when I was fifteen. Did I know the different phases a vampire went through? Well, I knew some of them but remained unclear on what happened after a certain point. One thing I knew for sure—vampires were not invincible. As for the rest, I’d come here hunting for the gory details of their lifespan, since things in my life had taken a distinct turn for the worst. I couldn’t let Marshall know that. He wouldn’t trust me if he thought I had my own agenda, so I returned his gaze patiently and acted bored but willing to let him play teacher all day.

I didn’t know Dudley’s story. He looked like he was in his late twenties with dark eyebrows and a rough five o’clock shadow. His expression read like a tombstone. The message was simple—dead men don’t talk and neither do I. Too bad really, since he looked like a movie star from black and white film noir, despite his rough edges.

Marshall waited for several long moments before he grunted, “Get out. You’re both worthless.”

Unfortunately, both Dudley and I were in Marshall’s office for job interviews. Dudley was applying to be Marshall’s partner while I was applying to be his receptionist. Dudley was a private detective already. And me—as I said before, my aspirations were fewer. I just wanted to root around Marshall’s files and get as much information on vamps as I could before I got canned.

I cleared my throat, directed my gaze pointedly at Dudley, and said, “Sorry, I rather hoped this would be a private interview.”

“I don’t have time for private interviews,” Marshall said crossly.

I ground my teeth together. I didn’t want to have to do this, but it was better to act like a fool than to let a vampire hunter masquerading as a private detective in on my true stance. Dumb girl routine number four coming right up. “I’m not interested in vamps,” I said, twirling a lock of my hair. I wouldn’t be able to use that routine after I turned twenty-four, so I had to get good use out of it while I could. “I’d rather answer your phone, sort your messages and keep your files straight than get involved with crap that could kill me. I thought you just stalked married women who strayed from the path.”

Marshall gave me a weird look and then opened a jar on his desk and offered me a piece of round pink bubblegum. Probably the same stuff that had been stomped into the carpet.

I shook my head and said, “No thanks. I’m trying to cut back.”

He smiled. He liked me. No problem. I was in.

“Okay, so girlie here is too smart to get involved with vamps. What about you, boyo?”

Dudley shook his head coolly and recited in disinterested tones, “A vampire goes through four cycles. First, they are a human who has been tagged by a vampire to be their mate. If the human is unwilling, it will die.”

“And if the human is willing?”

“Then they will end up sharing massive quantities of their own blood with the vampire as well as drinking the vampire’s blood. A human won’t transform into a vampire unless they consume at least ten liters of vampire blood over two months. During this time, both parties experience a drug-like euphoria where they believe that they can’t possibly live without the other. Even ancient vampires can fall into this hole. Many of them can’t bear to kill their lover, even though they know what will inevitably happen next. Once this first phase is complete, the human is a new vampire and even if it is unreasonable, both the new vampire and the old one are filled with suspicion and anger toward each other. The old vampire liked the human and is disgusted by them once they change, so much so that they will murder them if they have the chance. The new one thinks the old one is jealous of their newfound power and beauty. I’m sure there are plenty of different emotions experienced, but in the end—one of them will kill the other. I’ve never heard of a case where one of them didn’t die. Then there’s the third phase, where the vampire who survived is not a nuisance to anybody. They don’t kill in the third phase.”

All of this, I knew. It was beyond this that I hit unfamiliar territory. What happened in the fourth phase?

Dudley looked indifferent, but he continued. “In the final stage, they want to mate, but vampires don’t exactly mate. They either make a new vampire out of a human and die, or they repeat the process of falling in love over and over again without giving up their legacy. That path turns them into killing machines and causes no end of trouble. I’m sure you’ve seen it.”

Marshall shook his head carefully. Then he looked at me and said, “Be careful who you date.”

I turned my head away saucily. “Why would I want to date anyone?”

Actually, I was having a hard time hiding my discomfort, and turning my head gave me an out. What Dudley said was exactly what I suspected, but I didn’t want to believe it. What mess was I going to have to clean up?

Marshall talked to us some more before he told me I got the job and dismissed me saying, “If you want to stay out of trouble, then you’ve probably heard enough.”

I nodded, shook hands with both of them, and headed out. I particularly looked into Dudley’s face before I left. I wanted to know what he thought of me. His expression was exactly what I expected. He thought I was a piece of fluff—completely unworthy of his attention. Perfect.

Neither of them would have suspected that I was a murderer.

After hearing Dudley’s speech, my story probably won’t seem outrageous. Maybe it’ll make perfect sense.

I’m not really a murderer. They don’t call it murder when the victim is a confirmed vampire. They call it ‘ending a legacy’. You have to have a license to do it and back when I was fifteen I

didn't have one. It's a huge secret that I have one now, even though I haven't killed any vampires since I got it. The police don't issue them to anyone under twenty-one, so I've had mine for two years. Like I said, I don't use it—it's *just in case*.

My story begins when I noticed that my older sister, London, was dating someone. This in itself seemed remarkable, and if you'd known her, you'd know why. Shy doesn't even begin to describe her. When they started dating, I took an interest. She was seventeen when I was fifteen. It was in my best interest to learn as much as I could from her experience—except that she wouldn't tell me about him. The only thing I knew was his name, Schroder. True, I saw him from time to time, but together they only had eyes for each other. I'd never seen obsession disguised as romance before. I thought everyone was like that when they fell in love... until it turned bad.

You guessed it. He turned out to be a vampire and just like in the scenario Dudley took us through—they shared blood until it drove them both mad. London would have been the one to die because even though her instincts were changing, something inside her stayed the same. She was too reserved to murder him and he was strong. He looked to be in his early twenties, but vampires didn't age. Who knew how old he was? There was no way she was the first lover he'd taken, and even though London knew he would eventually kill her, she had no drive to beat him to it.

So, what drove me to do it for her? That part of the story is still a little fuzzy in my memory. I remember one night when they were on the couch. He was drinking her blood while I watched from the shadows. She groaned and something in the sound warned me that he was going too far. Tonight would be London's last night... unless I did something. I knew it wouldn't be enough just to scare him away. No vampire can stay away from the person they have transformed. They are obsessed until one of them is dead. I remember crouching with a knife in my hand and then... blank. I don't remember anything until I came to be standing over his corpse, stained red with his blood, and listening to London's screams. Then I remember disposing of the body—burning it in the backyard along with a huge pile of perfectly good two-by-fours and spruce branches to cover the smell.

That was it.

Looking back, it's hard to believe that I could have had the energy to commit a crime like that and then cover up my tracks. However, to this day no one has questioned me about it.

Sometimes I wonder what kind of vampire Schroder was, not to have anyone know where he went or care once he was gone. Even if the local police didn't care what happened to one useless vampire, one would think that he would have somebody. Instead, no one came looking, and in the weeks and months and years that followed my crime, not a single soul has asked me about him.

Every year since London became a vampire, she has become more and more withdrawn. Is she angry at me for what I did to her lover? If she is, she has never said so. Most of her thoughts are a mystery. She doesn't talk and most days, it seems like she doesn't move. Sunlight hurts her eyes and she says the night reminds her of her mistakes. She stays home. She does craft projects and sells them online, never leaving the flat. We live in an apartment in the city and keep it a secret from our parents that she's been dead for the past eight years. In an area as corrupt as this, it's easier to keep secret than you'd think. The only thing that happens is that my mother comments on our appearances when we come home for the holidays.

“London, you look like an angel,” my mother says wistfully as she gazes dreamily at her oldest daughter. Then she looks at me tragically and says, “Sweeper, have you been using that under-eye concealer I bought you?”

“No,” I answer, even though I exhausted that tube and started on a fresh one. I don’t mind getting old. Old feels clean.

I wasn’t looking for a job related to vampires until London broke from her routine by going out at night. After spending almost a decade inside, she started sneaking out of the apartment, down the fire escape to prowl nightclubs. I followed her almost every night for a week before I realized what was happening. I didn’t like to admit it, but Dudley confirmed the truth. She was looking for a mate. And I was wondering how to dispose of another corpse because I wouldn’t let London’s mate murder her and he surely would if I don’t stop him.

So I applied for the job working for Marshall. How did he get rid of dead vampires?

Chapter Two

Familiar Face

Monday morning, I showed up for work. Marshall and Dudley were holed up in the former's office. Marshall only surfaced once to show me how to work the coffee machine and give me a pile of non-paying client files to call. Why didn't he mention that I'd be doing that on Friday? I might have thought twice about the job. Reluctantly, I took the stack of files. Then the surly detective gave me forty bucks to go buy them breakfast with. Heck! How long had they been talking?

When I finally sat down to make the phone calls, I realized this job wasn't as meaningless as I supposed. Actually, it was quite the opposite. The first file not only had the billing information but also contained the whole case history. Marshall was supposed to track down a missing person. Marshall had found them—wife gone astray—just as I suggested on Friday. Now the husband was pissed and didn't want to pay.

It wasn't until the fourth file that I found something regarding vampires. It was a simple case. The client just wanted to know if someone they knew was a vampire. They weren't. Case closed.

After that, almost every case was about vampires. For the most part, the conclusions Marshall arrived at were less than satisfactory to the clients, hence they wouldn't pay.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Dudley came out of Marshall's office, carrying a stack of files. He stopped and balanced them on one of the chairs in the waiting room while he sorted them into his briefcase. I felt his eyes on me as I opened the last file.

"Am I that cute?" I ask humorlessly, looking into his unimpressed eyes again.

"You look familiar to me. That's all. I just can't place you."

"Maybe we knew each other when we were growing up?" I suggested, not believing a word of it.

He cocked his head to the side. "It's possible. I remember I knew a girl with the same name as you once, but it couldn't be you. You don't strike me as the kind of woman who would ever choose to slaughter a pig."

The late afternoon sun came through the window to my left and the Venetian blinds cast horizontal shadows across his shirt. It was hard to say what made him so attractive to me at that moment. Even though his face was made up of perfect lines and the sunlight made his brown hair shine like copper—the feeling came from somewhere deeper. Something about him screamed that if he knew everything there was to know about me, he would get it. He would get everything. He would understand why I killed the vampire. He would toast me for not hesitating to do what I had to. He would approve of my protecting my sister and allowing myself to grow old and unused at her side. Maybe it was just a passing fancy—or maybe he was my soul mate and I was going to have to let him slip through my fingers like I had every other man I'd ever wanted to pursue.

He leaned on the desk and looked at my face. "Do we know each other?"

"My memory isn't so good," I said limply.

"Well, I'll think about it," he said as he swung his bag over his shoulder and marched out.

Through the glass partition, I watched him walk down the hall before I got back to work. He had great shoulders.

Then I had a look at the last file's contents. It was an older file—opened three years ago. It was a request from a person who seemed to be a vampire. That surprised me, but I supposed

even vampires sometimes needed a detective service. I bet Marshall was liberal-minded enough to retire vampires on vampire requests as well as human requests. This particular bloodsucker was looking for two vampires who had gone missing. In human time, a person is missing after they have been gone for two or three days. In vampire time, no one thought to look for these bloodsuckers until they had been missing for five years. I stared at the pictures in disbelief. One of the vampires he was searching for was Schroder, and the other one was my sister, London.

I was so shocked I felt like I was having a panic attack, but I refused to lose my visible cool. Rather than worry about the details, I forced my eyes to the front page to see Marshall's conclusion. When I looked at the billing information, I saw that the client was a paying client. Their balance was zero. If that was the case, why was I being asked to call him?

Then I saw something that made me clamp my hand over my mouth. Tucked in the file was a picture of London leaning against a pole at a bar, with me standing in the background. I picked up the picture and examined it carefully with my heart pounding in my throat. Had Marshall realized that I was in this picture? Was he showing it to me intentionally?

Marshall probably needed to contact the client because he'd found a new lead. This file was in the wrong pile.

The old detective began to stir in his office.

I put the picture back and closed the file. Then I stuck a post-it note on the front that read, "No amount owing. Action required?" Then I picked up the pile and went into Marshall's office like I wasn't worried about a thing.

I tapped on his door politely and he called for me to come in.

"I finished the pile," I say nonchalantly. "There are a few minutes before five o'clock. Is there anything else you'd like me to do before I go, Mr. Marshall?"

He turned around and looked at me. Dudley wasn't the only one with an unreadable expression. I couldn't tell if he knew I was connected with London, but if he didn't know, it was only a matter of time before he figured it out. My resume had my address on it and if he followed London home when he saw her at the bar, she would lead him to the same address. However, there was also the possibility that he didn't look at my address carefully. I didn't talk to London at the clubs. Maybe he hadn't made the connection, but all the pieces were there.

I had to do something.

"No," Marshall said, interrupting my thoughts. "You can go home."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow."

I gathered my things and walked out of the office, thinking about evasive action. I could send London home to our parents. That wouldn't be too hard. I could handle her mail (if there was any) while she was in the country and my parents could keep an eye on her until Marshall stopped looking for her. As for me working in his office—it was perfectly fine. You keep your friends close and your enemies even closer.

Besides, our parents lived in the boonies. I wouldn't have to worry about London looking for a mate out there. There is never anyone interesting out there. I only met one remotely appealing boy when I was growing up. He lived next door to us when we were teenagers. He was closer to London's age—totally gawky—but kind and the fabric of some of my best memories growing up.

"What are you thinking about so completely?" Dudley said abruptly, coming up behind me as I exited the building. "You should be more aware of your surroundings. Someone could sneak up on you."

Like him?

I answered wearily, "I guess someone could. Did you forget something upstairs?"

“Not really,” he said, slinging his bag over his shoulder in that way of his. “I just thought you might like me to walk you home.”

And lead him straight to London, no doubt. Marshall might not have noticed the duplicate addresses, but Dudley could have. He was a P.I. in his own right, wasn't he?

I smiled coyly and prepared to tell a few lies. “Actually, I wasn't going straight home. My fridge is completely empty. I was going out to eat, but I'm sans a companion tonight. Would you care to join me?”

“Your treat?”

“As long as I get to pick where we're going. I'm a receptionist—not a billionaire.”

“Does that mean you're going to take me to the café across the street?” he asked, indicating the saddest little joint with grubby windows and no one eating inside.

“Yep,” I said positively and began making my way toward it.

Dudley grabbed my arm. “No. That's not even a real restaurant. It's a drug nest. The only people who pop in there are going to get stoned.”

“So? I'm sure they still serve food,” I said, with my nose in the air.

He sighed. “The point is, the bread will be moldy and the meat will be expired. I'll treat you to a real restaurant.”

I nodded.

I was actually hoping he'd refuse me entirely and leave, but having him pay for my meal was a close second.

Dudley's idea of a restaurant was different from mine. The place had atmosphere. The walls were papered in dark red brocade and the seats were upholstered in black velvet. Each table was lit by a single chandelier hanging over it. The table cloth itself was red with a black fringe.

And he thought the place I wanted to take him was creepy.

He seemed to do a quick reading of my thoughts and before he commented, “This isn't a drug nest. Neither is it a vampire hangout. This is probably one of the safest places to talk in the city. It's run by Russians.”

“Really?” I asked skeptically. “So why did you want to bring me here specifically? Is there something you need privacy to say?”

“Do you only like privacy *some* of the time?”

“No,” I said, feeling foolish.

He eyed me carefully and let the subject pass. “Your name is Sweeper? That's quite unusual.”

I started playing with a lock of my hair and flat out refused to answer such a stupid question. Of course, that was my name. What game was he playing?

“I still can't shake the idea that I know you from somewhere. My first name is Tate. Does that ring any bells with you?”

I tapped my fingers on the table and pretended to think, but I knew that if it didn't ring any bells in two seconds, it wasn't going to. With no bells ringing in my head, I looked at the ceiling to buy some time. He probably didn't remember me from anything other than the case of Schroder and London. He was trying to get me into a position where I had to admit what I knew, but I was not falling for it and there was no way I had met this stony-faced man before. He wasn't going to corner me.

“If we've met before then I'm sorry—I don't remember you,” I said after a lengthy interval.

Then suddenly his eyes went wide. It was only for a moment, but from that single unguarded moment, he betrayed his thoughts. He honestly didn't know who I was before and now he had made the connection.

I sat still and kept my expression neutral.

Could I go to jail for killing Schroder back then? Probably not. What I did was illegal, but killing a vampire wasn't on par with murdering a human. In a way, it was a public service, like returning a corpse to the cemetery. If I got caught by the cops, there was no problem. They were reasonable.

What I was worried about *was illegal* retribution. It sounded like the vampire who hired Marshall was too lazy to track down London himself. In that case, could it be that he was too lazy to take care of the revenge of ending London's legacy himself? If that were true, then Marshall and Dudley could have been asked to kill her. The only thing I needed to do was make sure that no one found my sister. That would be enough as long as they didn't find out it was actually me who killed Schroder.

"What were you like when you were a teenager?" Dudley asked, leaning back in his chair and pulling out the makings for a cigarette. Actually, he wasn't even looking at me.

"Excuse me?" I asked. I was confused. How much did he know? Did he know more about the case than I suspected? I should have looked closer at that file before I gave it back to Marshall. I should have xeroxed it.

Dudley's eyes shone with interest as he went on. "Were you a loner or a diva or..." he hesitated, "a tomboy?"

My eyes narrowed. I actually was a tomboy, but how did he know to ask that? "I was boring. What were you like?" I asked evasively.

To my surprise, he answered clearly—even elaborating a little. "I was a loner, so alone, actually, that I remember my best friends were the girls who lived next door."

"Did they talk to you?"

"One of them did."

Just then my mobile phone rang and I excused myself to answer it. We hadn't ordered yet anyway, so he could hang on a second. Except it wasn't really a phone call. It was my alarm bell going off, but Dudley didn't know that. There are so many ring tones—my alarm bell could be mine. It was set to remind me to wake London up. Usually, if I didn't wake her, she'd sleep all night and all day and then all night again. She'd never wake up.

However, I was looking for an excuse to duck out on Dudley. Yeah, I did say I was attracted to him earlier, but that was before I saw the file on London. I had to get her sent off that night. If I worked all night, I could get all her stuff out by dawn and then have Dudley over for dinner at my place the next night. He could see that she was nowhere to be found. At least, that was my plan.

I pretended to talk on the phone and then made my way back to the table.

"I'm sorry," I said apologetically. "I have to go, but how about if I cook you supper tomorrow night to make up for it?"

Dudley stared at me. "Fine, but can't you have a drink with me before you go?"

I frowned. "I can't. Are you going to be at the office with Marshall tomorrow?"

"No."

"That's too bad. Could you meet me outside his office at five?"

He nodded and I smiled charmingly. At least I hoped it looked charming.

I walked out of the restaurant thinking about him. He was a loner, huh?

When I got back to the apartment, I was immediately aware that something was wrong. Did something happen to London?

I ran to her room, threw the door open, and a horrific sight welcomed me.

“Bloody hell!” I exclaimed.

A man, a human, hovered over London. Splattered blood stained the bedclothes and the carpet. London had slashes on her throat and the guy was wiping the blood off his lips with the back of his hand and then licking it off.

“Piss off!” he shouted.

I pulled my phone out of my bag and yelled, “I’m calling the police.”

The guy looked genuinely spooked and made for the window, but I got a good look at him before he tripped down the fire escape. He was blond with unshaven stubble on his chin and light-colored eyes. Like her last boyfriend, I couldn’t see the attraction. He looked creepy, with dark purple lines under his eyes, but then again, what was there to see except someone who wanted to drink blood?

Funny though, I didn’t see that when I looked at London.

My sister lay motionless on the bed with a glassy look in her eyes. Actually, she hadn’t looked sharp since before she became a vamp, but this expression was more vacant than usual. Her dark hair curled around her white face and she stared off into space like she hardly noticed my arrival.

I closed the window, locked it, and drew the curtains. Then I went into the bathroom attached to her room and got a bandage to stop her bleeding. Vampire blood didn’t clot at all compared to human blood. After all, a vampire was only two steps from being a corpse. It would take ages for her cuts to close. As I wrapped her wounds, she yanked the blanket out from under her and pulled it over her chest. If she was cold, he must have drunk quite a bit.

I shuddered. What had London done to her body and for what? It would take her over a year to close up, even after she stitched herself shut. Sometimes I thought vampires were more like Frankenstein’s monster than Dracula. Nevertheless, vampire biology fascinated me. For one thing, their digestive system didn’t work. Since London’s body wasn’t taking in any new nutrients she was surviving on what she got from Schroder, eight years ago. There was no new material to rebuild the broken cells. However, even though her heart ceased to beat, her nervous system still worked beautifully. In fact, it vastly surpassed a human’s. The tiny electric current flowing through her allowed her five senses to keep working. It allowed her to feel pain, to feel tired, and to activate killer reflexes—if she had any. Right now, it looked like she was allowing herself to be drained again. Some vampire she was turning out to be.

If she was cold, her electric functions were slowing down, which meant she hadn’t drunk enough of his blood to maintain the status quo.

I whispered quietly, “How much has he drunk? A cup? A liter?”

Silence.

“Two liters?”

She averted her eyes.

I didn’t ask anything after that. She wasn’t going to tell me how close she had come to changing him into a vampire. Instead, I got her suitcase down from her closet.

She gazed at me wearily from the bed. “What are you doing?”

My look could have killed, but she was already dead, so my scowl had no effect on her. “I started working for a private investigator today and when I was going through his files, I found a file on you. There’s a vampire looking for you and Schroder. I don’t want him to find you, so you have to go home until the P.I. closes the case.”

“I can’t go anywhere,” she whispered.

“Why not?”

“Because Garth is here and I have to be with him.”

I was so angry I could spit. I stomped around the room cramming her belongings into the case until it was overflowing. “You’ll die,” I informed her like it was news. “Even if my P.I.’s client doesn’t get you... when this guy Garth becomes a vampire, he’ll kill you.”

“He’s not going to kill me. He has some friends that will protect me.”

I wasn’t surprised by what London said. Nothing she could say would have surprised me at that point. Vampires and humans who are in the love phase will say and do just about anything. It was after the high passed that the dangerous time came, but London was too blind to see it and my hands were tied because the moron she was dating was still a human. Until the recently exiting Garth became a vampire I couldn’t do anything to him. It would be better for everyone if the loser stayed human and left her alone.

Well, at least there was one silver lining on that dark cloud day. London said she had to stay here so she could be with Garth. That made it sound like he wouldn’t be able to follow her out to our parents’ place.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and said, “Listen to me, London. Haven’t I protected you all these years? Can’t you do just one thing for me and go out to Mum and Dad’s without an argument? The private investigator I’m working for—Marshall—is supposed to report your whereabouts to a vampire. What do you think will happen when he does that? Someone will come after you and end your legacy. Please. Put your romance with this guy, Garth, on hold for two minutes. I’ll find a way to get Marshall to drop the case. You might be able to come back to the city within a week.” I didn’t actually believe what I said for a second, but I put my heart into my speech anyway.

London looked tired but otherwise unreadable. It was always like this. I was never sure what she was thinking.

After what felt like an age, she said, “I had actually been thinking of moving out soon anyway, but if you want me to hide out in the country for a few days, I guess I can do that for you. Afterward, I want to move in with Garth.”

I frowned... deeply. I didn’t want London to move in with her sleazy boyfriend who would inevitably kill her if Marshall’s crew didn’t, but I couldn’t decide if I should argue the point now. This was all happening too fast.

I’d have to cross that bridge when I came to it. The most important thing at that moment was to get London out of the city—away from Marshall. She’d be safer.

I got up off the bed and called to arrange for a truck to come to pick up her things that very night. Then I braced myself for the work of moving her things when she was as helpful as a corpse. It was going to be a long night.

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