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Opening extract from

Sinner

Written by

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Not The End, But Right Before

I am a werewolf in L.A.

You asked why I did it.

Did what?

— The whole thing, Cole. The everything.

You, hyperbolic you, don't really mean *the everything*. You mean the last five weeks. You mean me burning down your place of work. Getting kicked out of the only sushi restaurant you liked. Stretching your favorite leggings and then tearing them running from the cops.

You mean why I came back here.

That is not the everything, even if it feels like it now.

— I know why you did it.

Yeah?

— You just did it so you could say "I am a werewolf in L.A."

You're always telling me I only ever do things because they will make good TV, or say things because I know they'll make good lyrics later, or do things because I like the way I look doing them. You say it like I have a choice. Things come in my eyes

and ears and through my pores, and my receptors begin to pulse restlessly and my neurons fire like cannons, and by the time everything gets into my brain and comes out the other side, it's all transformed into a different species, pixels or channels, glossy or matte. I can't change the way I'm made. I'm a performer, a singer, a werewolf, a sinner.

Just because I'm singing it for a crowd doesn't make it untrue.

If we make it through this alive, I'm going to tell you the truth of why. And this time you had better believe me.

I came back for you, Isabel.

Chapter One

· COLE ·

F♮ LIVE: Today on the wire we have young Cole St. Clair, lead singer of NARKOTIKA, giving his first interview in — well, a long time. Two years ago he went facedown during a concert, and right after that, he went missing. Totally off the radar. Cops were dredging rivers. Fangirls wept and built shrines. Six months later, news came out that he was in rehab. And then he was just gone. But it looks like soon we'll be hearing some new music from America's favorite rock prodigy. He's just signed a deal with Baby North.

"Are you a dog person or a puppy person, Larry?" I asked, craning my head to look out the deeply tinted window. View out the left: blinding-white cars. View out the right: fossil-fuel-black cars. Mostly Mercedes with a chance of Audis. Sun glittered and dazzled off their hoods. Palm trees sprouted from the landscape at irregular intervals. I was here. Finally here.

I had an East Coaster's love of the West Coast. It was simple and pure and unadulterated by anything as obscene as the truth.

My driver looked at me in the rearview mirror. His eyelids

were halfhearted tents pitched over his red eyes. He was a dismal inhabitant of a suit unhappy to house him. "Leon."

My cell phone was an insubstantial sun against my ear. "*Leon* is not a possible answer to that question."

"That's my name," he said.

"Of course it is," I said warmly. I hadn't thought he looked like a Larry, now that I thought about it. Not with that watch. Not with that mouth. Leon was not from L.A., I decided. Leon was probably from Wisconsin. Or Illinois. "Dogs. Puppies."

His mouth deflated as he considered it. "I suppose puppies."

Everyone always said puppies. "Why puppies?"

Larry — no, Leon! — stumbled over his words, as if he hadn't considered the idea before. "They're more interesting to watch, I guess. Always moving."

I couldn't blame him. I would've said puppies myself.

"Why do you think they get slow, Leon?" I asked. My phone was very hot against my ear. "Dogs, I mean?"

Leon didn't hesitate with this answer. "Life wears them down."

F♮ LIVE: *Cole? Are you still there?*

COLE ST. CLAIR: *I sort of took a mental vacation during your intro. I was just asking my driver if he preferred dogs or puppies.*

F♮ LIVE: *It was a long intro. Does he have a preference?*

COLE ST. CLAIR: *Do* you*?*

F♮ LIVE: *Puppies, I guess.*

COLE ST. CLAIR: *Ha! Double ha. Larry — Leon — sides with you. Why did you choose puppies?*

F♮ LIVE: *I suppose they're cuter.*

I held the phone away from my mouth. "Martin from *F Natural Live* chose puppies, too. Cuter."

This knowledge didn't seem to cheer Leon very much.

COLE ST. CLAIR*: Leon finds them more entertaining. More energetic.*

F♮ LIVE: *That's exhausting, though, isn't it? I guess if it's someone else's puppy. Then you can watch it and the mess is someone else's problem. Do you have a dog?*

I *was* a dog. Back in Minnesota, I both tenanted and belonged to a pack of temperature-sensitive werewolves. Some days, that fact seemed more important than others. It was one of those secrets that meant more to other people.

COLE ST. CLAIR*: No. No, no, no.*

F♮ LIVE: *Four nos. This is an exclusive for our show, guys. Cole St. Clair definitely doesn't have a dog. But he might have an album soon. Let's put this in perspective. Remember when this was big, guys?*

On his end of the line, the opening chords of one of our last singles, "Wait/Don't Wait," sang out, pure and acidic. It had been played so often that it had lost every bit of its original emotional resonance for me; it was a song about me, written by someone else. It was a great song by someone else, though. Whoever came up with that bass riff knew what he was doing.

"You can talk," I told Leon. "I'm sort of on hold. They're playing one of my songs."

"I didn't say anything," Leon replied.

Of course he hadn't. He was suffering in silence, our man Leon, behind the wheel of this fancy L.A. limo.

"I thought you were telling me why you were driving this car."

It poured out of him, his life story. It began in Cincinnati, too young to drive. And ended here in a hired Cadillac, too old to do anything else. It lasted thirty seconds.

"Do you have a dog?" I asked him.

"It died."

Of course it had died. Behind us, someone honked. A black car or a white car, and almost certainly a Mercedes or an Audi. I had been in Los Angeles for thirty-eight minutes, and eleven of those had been in traffic. I've been told there are parts of L.A. where the cliché of continuous traffic is not true, but I'm guessing that's because no one else wants to frequent them. I was not excellent at sitting still.

I swiveled to look out the back window. There, in a sea of monochrome, a yellow Lamborghini idled, bright as a child's toy, a knot of palm trees as backdrop. And on the other side of it was a swimming-pool-colored Volkswagen bus driven by a woman with dreadlocks. As I turned back around, sliding down the leather seat, I saw the sun glance off warehouse roofs, off terra-cotta tile, off forty million pairs of huge sunglasses. Oh, this place. *This place*. I felt another surge of joy.

"Are you famous?" Leon asked as we crept forward. My song still played in my ear, tinny.

"If I was famous, would you have to ask me?"

The truth was that fame was an inconsistent friend, never there when you needed it, ever-present when you needed some time away from it. The truth was that I was nothing to Leon, and, statistically, everything to at least one person within a five-mile radius.

In the car beside us, a guy in Wayfarers caught me gazing at California and gave me a thumbs-up. I returned it.

"Is this interview on the radio right now?" Leon asked.

"That's what they tell me."

Leon ran through the stations. He blew right by "Wait/Don't Wait." I shook his seat a little until he backtracked.

"This one?" He looked dubious. My voice crooned through the speakers, coaxing listeners to remove at least one item of clothing and promising them — *promising* them — it would be worth it in the morning.

"Doesn't it sound like me?"

Leon looked at my face in the rearview mirror, as if looking at me would give him his answer. His eyes were so very red. This, I thought, was a man who felt things deeply. It was hard to imagine being as sad as he was in a place like this, but I guessed I had been sad here once, too.

That felt like a long time ago, though.

"I suppose it does."

On the radio, the song drew to a close.

F♮ LIVE: *So there we are, people. Remember now? Oh, the summers of rocking out to NARKOTIKA. Okay, Cole. Are you there, or are you conducting another study on dogs?*

COLE ST. CLAIR*: We were musing on fame. Leon has not heard of me.*

LEON: *It's not your fault. I just don't listen to much else but talk radio, or sometimes jazz.*

F♮ LIVE: *Is that Leon? What's he saying?*

COLE ST. CLAIR*: He's more of a jazz guy. You'd know it if you saw him, Martin. Leon's very jazzy.*

I jazzed my hands for the rearview mirror. Leon's hooded eyes regarded me for a sad moment. Then one of his hands crept off the gearshift to do 50 percent of jazz hands.

F♮ LIVE: *I believe you. Which album of yours are you going to tell him to start with?*

COLE ST. CLAIR*: Probably just that cover of "Spacebar" that we did with Magdalene. It's jazzy.*

F♮ LIVE: *Is it?*

COLE ST. CLAIR*: It's got a saxophone in it.*

F♮ LIVE: *I'm blown away by your knowledge of musical genres. Say, let's talk about that deal with Baby North. Have you worked with her before?*

COLE ST. CLAIR*: I had alw —*

F♮ LIVE: *I wonder if everybody knows who Baby is?*

COLE ST. CLAIR*: Martin, it's very rude to interrupt.*

F♮ LIVE: *Sorry, man.*

LEON*: I know who she is.*

COLE ST. CLAIR*: Really? Her and not me? Leon knows who she is.*

F♮ LIVE: *He* is *jazzy. Does he want to sum it up for the listeners at home? I mean, if he's not in danger of crashing?*

I offered my phone to Leon.

"This is a hands-free state," Leon said.

"I'll hold it for you," I offered, expecting him to refuse. But he shrugged, agreeable.

Sliding behind his seat, I held my phone to his ear. He had one of those haircuts with a very defined ear shape carved into the side of it.

LEON: *She's that lady with the web TV shows. The crazy one. It's Sharp Teeth Dot Com, but she spells it strange. With numbers, I think? Sharp* t-*three-three*-t-h *dot com? I don't know. It might be ones instead of* ts.

F♮ LIVE: *Do you watch any of her shows?*

LEON: *Sometimes in between pickups, I watch on my phone. She had that one last year. That drug lady with the baby?*

F♮ LIVE: *Kristin Bank. That's the one that put sharpt33th .com on the radar for most people. Who knew serialized rehab pregnancy could be such a draw? Did you like it?*

LEON: *I don't know if they are shows that you like or don't like. You just watch them.*

F♮ LIVE: *I know exactly what you mean. Okay, let's have Cole again. You might be wondering why she's interested in putting him on an original web TV program. Why do you think that would be, Cole?*

I was not an idiot. Baby North was interested in me because I came with a built-in audience. She was interested in me because I had a pretty face and knew how to do my hair better than most guys. She was interested in me because I overdosed on the stage of Club Josephine, and then vanished.

COLE ST. CLAIR: *Oh, my great music, probably. Also, I'm super charming. I'm sure that's it.*

Leon offered a limp smile. In front of us, the cars sluggishly shuffled like playing cards. The sun rippled thickly off mirrors and reflectors. The palms lining the highway were lanes and lanes away. I couldn't believe I was here in California, looking right at it, and yet couldn't touch it yet. The interior of this car still felt at least two states away.

F♮ LIVE: *That sounds true. She's known for her taste in music.*
COLE ST. CLAIR: *I get that. That's a joke.*
F♮ LIVE: *You are a quick one.*
COLE ST. CLAIR: *I've never actually heard that before.*
F♮ LIVE: *Oh! I get that. That's a joke.*

Both Leon and I laughed out loud.

I'd met Martin. Though he had an eternally youthful voice, he'd been in music journalism for longer than I'd been alive. The first interview I'd done with him had been twenty minutes of tastelessly conveyed sexscapades, and then I'd met him in person and discovered he was old enough to be my father.

Questions, questions: How dare he sound twenty and be sixty? Did they make cosmetic surgery for your vocal cords? And just how badly had I offended him? But it turned out that Martin was one of those not-dirty older men who were amused by us still-dirty younger men.

F♮ LIVE: *How long are you taking to write and record this album? It's not long, right?*
COLE ST. CLAIR*: I think it's six weeks.*
F♮ LIVE: *That seems ambitious.*

If you looked up *ambition* on Wikipedia, my photo was the first thing that came up. I did have some material that I'd written while sitting alone at camp in Minnesota, but it had been strange to try to complete anything in a vacuum. No band. No listeners.

They'd come together in the studio.

COLE ST. CLAIR*: I've got a vision.*
F♮ LIVE: *Do you think you'll stay in L.A.?*

I wasn't particularly gifted at *staying* anywhere. But L.A. was where Isabel Culpeper was. Thinking her name was a dangerous, obsessive thought-road. I would not let myself call her until I had gotten to the house. I would not call her until I had thought of a theatrical way to tell her I was in California.

I would not call her until I was sure she would be happy I was here.

If she wasn't happy I was here, then . . .

With one move, I slapped shut the air-conditioning vents. I felt too close to a wolf for the first time in a long time. I felt that churn in my stomach that meant the shift was close.

COLE ST. CLAIR*: That depends. On if L.A. wants me.*

F♮ LIVE: *Everyone wants you.*

Leon held up his phone so that I could see the screen. He had just purchased "Spacebar" by NARKOTIKA (feat. Magdalene). He seemed happier than when I'd first met him, back when he was Larry. Outside, the heat tantalized. The asphalt shuddered in the exhaust. In a minute, we hadn't moved an inch. I was looking at L.A. through a TV screen.

And now I'd let myself think Isabel's name and there wasn't room for anything else. This car, this interview, this everything else — Isabel was the real thing. She was the song.

COLE ST. CLAIR*: You know what, Martin and Leon, I'm going to get out of the car now. Walk the rest of the way.*

Leon raised an eyebrow. "This isn't a walking road. I think it's illegal to walk on the shoulder. Do you see anyone else getting out of their cars and walking?"

No, I didn't. But I very rarely saw anybody else doing anything I was doing. And if I did, it usually meant it was time for me to stop.

Isabel —

F♮ LIVE: *Wait, what's Leon saying? Where are you?*

I'd already left the interview behind. It took every bit of my willpower to drag my attention back to Martin's questions.

COLE ST. CLAIR*: He's advising against my plan. We're on the 405. It's okay. I'm in good shape. You wouldn't believe the muscles we pick up in rehab. Leon, are you coming with me?*

I had already unbuckled my seat belt. I dragged my backpack — the only thing I'd brought from Minnesota — to my side of the car. Leon's eyes opened wide. He couldn't tell if I was serious, which was ridiculous, because I was always serious.

Isabel. Only a few miles away.

My heart was starting to tumble inside me. I knew I should contain it, because I still had a long way to go. But I couldn't quite pull it off. This day had been so many weeks of planning and dreaming in the making.

F♮ LIVE: *Are you trying to get Leon to abandon a car on the interstate?*

COLE ST. CLAIR*: I'm trying to save his life before it's too late. Come with me, Leon. We shall walk away from this car, you and I. We shall find fro-yo and make the world better.*

Leon held up a helpless hand. Only moments before it had been a jazz hand. How he was letting me down.

LEON*: I can't. You shouldn't. Traffic is bad now, but in a few minutes, it'll be over. Just wait —*

I clapped my hand on his shoulder.

COLE ST. CLAIR: *Okay, I'm out. Thanks for having me on the show, Martin.*
F♮ LIVE: *Is Leon coming with you?*
COLE ST. CLAIR: *It doesn't look that way. Next time, though. Leon, enjoy the track. The account's all settled, right? Good.*
F♮ LIVE: *Cole St. Clair, former frontman of NARKOTIKA. A pleasure, as always.*
COLE ST. CLAIR: *Now,* that *I've heard before.*
F♮ LIVE: *The world's glad to have you back, Cole.*
COLE ST. CLAIR: *The world says that* now. *Okay. Gotta go.*

Hanging up, I opened the door. The car behind us let out the softest of honks as I climbed out. The heat — oh, the heat. It was an emotion. It owned me. The air smelled of forty million cars and forty million flowers. I felt a spasm of pure adrenaline, memory of everything I'd ever done in California and anticipation of everything that could be done.

Leon was staring out plaintively, so I leaned in swiftly. "It's never too late to change," I told him.

"I can't change," he replied. It crushed him.

I said, "Stab it and steer, Leon."

I slung my backpack over my shoulder, walked in front of an idling black Mercedes, and headed toward the closest exit.

Someone shouted, "NARKOTIKA forever!"

I blew him a kiss and then I jumped over the concrete barrier. When I landed, I was in California.