

Scarlet Blackwell

TEMPORAL OBSESSIONS

Content Warning:

This work contains mentions of drugs, usage of guns, religion, cults, swearing, blood, and physical violence. Please be wary of these or do not continue to read if you are sensitive to these themes. Self-care is advised.

Part 1

The trash bins smelled as terrible as they always did. Even standing halfway across the alley, its lingering stench still insulted my nostrils, but I was accustomed to it all the same. The darkened alley was concealed from the passing eye, the tips of my toes tapping against the ground as I waited. Counting the seconds that turned to minutes.

My lips pursed as I leaned back against the metal exterior of the building, staring up at the sky to watch the birds pass by overhead in the encroaching darkness. Only after a few more moments did he finally appear, turning my gaze toward the footsteps that slowly approached me. The flat of my foot pushed against the wall to stand steady again, taking a few paces to the middle of the pathway.

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my cargo pants, staring unbothered at my client as he conspicuously walked up to me. My lips curved into a half-smile, raising an eyebrow at the man in the black sweatshirt, a hood lifted to cover half of his face. His eyes were locked onto mine as his tense body shifted, pushing his own hands further into his hoodie pocket.

My hands fixed my t-shirt nonchalantly, checking a hangnail before putting them back into their pockets. I looked his jittery stature up and down, obviously overdressed to the party.

“Are you Lilema?” he asked.

I leaned over on one hip as I stifled a chuckle. One of my hands left their pocket to brush the long, brown locks away from my vision, giving me a better view of the scared puppy.

“Who’s asking?” I shrugged.

“Dylan,” he muttered, looking over his shoulder. “Bennett?”

“First time, Dylan?”

He stuttered slightly, standing a little taller than the second prior. But it didn’t last long with my eyes staring into his. His resilience waned, biting at the skin on his lip.

“Course not,” he said.

“Well, do you have the two thousand jults?” I asked.

“I thought we agreed on fifteen hundred.”

My hand dropped down to my side, slipping back into its pocket as I switched hips. The man’s eyebrows were scrunched, but I simply raised one of my own, a small grin playing across my lips.

“You agreed on fifteen hundred,” I said. “I’ve still got my bills to pay this month.”

“My whole outfit doesn’t even cost that much.”

“That’s on you,” I shrugged. “You should know how these things work. Premium drugs, premium price.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, reaching into his own pocket. “You got it on you?”

I pulled out a palm-sized box, tossing it a few inches into the air before letting it land effortlessly into my palm. Even in the dark, the black offset my milky tone. The box was tilted toward him, showing him the branding of my signature on its top in gilded letters. The shadow of the building beside us covered most of the cursive name.

“Obviously,” I said.

“How do I know I’m getting everything?” he asked.

“Half now, half after you check, then.”

He grumbled as he took out his phone: a horizontal, rectangular block around the size of two fingers. The man pressed a button on the top corner that popped open the halves by five inches, two thin rods connecting on either side. A light blue screen appeared between the black chunks, brightening more of his shady face in the darkness. He tapped a few buttons on the holographic screen with his thumb before finally pushing the half-slab back down. My own phone buzzed in my pocket, reaching in to grab and open it, reading the text on the opaque screen.

Dylan Bennett has sent over 1,000 jults.

I raised both eyebrows at him this time as I offered the engraved box, closing the phone between my hand and hip. Again, he looked over his shoulder. The man reached out with a shaky hand, and snatched the box quickly, breaking into a sprint in the opposite direction as fast as he could. Which wasn’t fast at all. I rolled my eyes with an accompanied sigh, dropping my phone back into my pocket.

Some clients always believed they could get away with whatever they wanted. They were the types to either steal or underpay, leaving the dealer to suffer the price on their own. But I was always aware of that tactic, and it only made things more fun.

I took a step forward, my foot planting itself against a platform of air that condensed and solidified beneath me at whim. Heeding my simple instruction. I pulled myself up like a stair, taking a single second to get into position. Leaning forward. Bending my knee slightly.

In one quick burst, the air exploded like a popped balloon, hurtling my body through the air in a rush of momentum. I flew directly over Dylan’s head, timing my movements as I furled and spun mid-air, planting my feet back on solid ground. The sound of his footsteps halted behind me, and I knew the expression he was holding before I even turned around. It was the same as everyone else’s that had seen something incomprehensible.

“H-How did you...”

Before he could think too hard, I threw a punch across his face. Knuckles connected to jaw, that then halted against another invisible wall on command. In a fraction of a second, it immediately set itself off, my attack followed instantly with a power that sent him flying into the building wall.

His head collided with a thick metal that made his eyes go dark, consciousness failing him as he fell to the ground in an effortless slump. I shook my head slowly in disappointment, walking toward him to reach down and grab the box from his hand. I juggled it again in my palm before dropping it back into my pocket, pulling out my phone again.

"Well, thank you, Dylan, for your one thousand jolts, but I do not think we will be doing business again," I said. "And all that just to try getting a little high."

I strolled out of the alleyway, emerging onto the quiet neighborhood sidewalk. A car zoomed past, though its quiet engine kept it from interrupting the peace. The vehicle hovered quickly past the speed limit, its directional wheels pushing the laws at an impressive rate.

Though, just as suddenly, a figure approached too close to my peripheral vision, my body instinctively jolting back from them. The familiar, pale stalker stopped in turn, holding back a mocking laugh at my sudden panic. The slightly shorter girl gleamed at me with light brown eyes, her sky-blue hoodie and jeans more apparent up close. Closer than she needed to be. But that was exactly what the blonde wanted.

"Oh. My god, Hailey," I said. "Don't do that."

"You're the one that's just standing there like an idiot," she giggled.

I rolled my eyes for the second time tonight, though I tried to hide the bigger smile I got from just seeing her cute face. Hearing her pretty voice. I was slowly starting to relax again, fighting against the intrusive thoughts for my best friend.

"What are you even doing here?" I asked as a distraction.

"I was going to text you about what you were doing for dinner later," she said. "But I thought I'd drop by to see how you were doing, too."

Her eyes glanced downward, smile fading slightly as she blinked back up at me. I knew what was coming whenever she gave me that look, and being a horrible liar around her wasn't going to help.

"Though, I guess you were out doing deals again," she said, drawing on her familiar motherly tone.

"How would you know?" I asked.

"You're wearing your cargo pants. And you only ever wear those when you're 'making deals.'"

I looked unknowingly down at my pants, realizing now she had picked up on that detail. A guilty hand slipped out of my pocket and fell back to its side. I looked away from her with a dismissive glance. The drug now weighed heavier in guilt, making me shift my leg to feel it less. My only instinct was to scratch the back of my head, glancing back at her with an apologetic shrug.

"Need I remind you how much trouble you can get into for dealing illegal drugs, Camille," she said.

"Okay, can we not use my name in front of a client?" I swiveled behind me to check for the unconscious man.

Hailey looked with me, suddenly taking my right arm, and walking me down the sidewalk. My heart skipped a beat, stumbling up to match her pace. There was no way to stop this part of her. It took us a few more seconds until we slowed down again, steadily walking at a normal speed out of earshot.

“You didn’t use your power again, did you?” she asked lower.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I said. “Plus, he had it coming. He tried getting a free discount.”

“Yes, but people don’t exactly know you have some weird magic.”

“And they still won’t know. That guy’s going to wake up and not remember a thing.”

I pulled my arm away from hers, switching sides to put myself closer to the street. Confidently, I re-linked our arms, guiding her closer to the houses we walked past. There were very few people outside at the end of the day.

“Wow, what a gentleman,” Hailey mocked.

“That’s gentlewoman,” I corrected with a jab of my shoulder into hers.

My newly freed hand was shoved back into its pocket and felt the small box that made it sting with guilt all over again. I kept my eyes focused on the path ahead, walking the few blocks back to my apartment in conjoined affection. My closed phone hovered over the scanner, unlocking the main entrance to the building.

The inside washed us with cooled air, stepping across the black rug that ran through to the end of a perpendicular hall. We turned right, left, and into the pristine elevator, soaking in the last of the classic beige walls before the door closed behind us. The elevator dinged, signaling the start of a short and weightless magnetic ascent.

“Are you sure you should be making deals so close to your place?” Hailey asked in the silence.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’ve never been caught before. It’s my lucky spot.”

“It’s always fine until you actually do get caught. Don’t you remember the—”

“Yes, I remember the stalker guy.” My eyes rolled. “But I make sure now that no one follows me after.”

She sighed, and I knew that was her way of saying that she didn’t know how to convince me. It was a victory that never felt sweet. I immediately followed it this time with a poke to her side, and she swatted me away with a small, ticklish smile. And so I poked her again.

The door dinged again, sliding open to my floor as I led us out and down the liminal hall. Each door was a dark, silver metal, accented with streaks of different colors catered to the person that lived there. They were surrounded by thick frames to lock them in place, and it was annoying how clucky the sound was of the older models.

Finally, with one more poke, I stepped up to my blue-shining door, waving the key of my phone. The frames thumped as it let the door go, the entryway sliding soundless out of sight. I let Hailey in first with a wave of my hand, following in right after her. The metal thumped back into place behind us.

The apartment was laced with dark red and orange themes — from tables, to walls, and even the carpets along the vinyl floor. Most things were colored in redwood or birch, only differing in countertops, cushions, and framing. I stretched into the open air, glancing at the strewed pile of branded boxes on my coffee table.

“When was the last time you cleaned up?” Hailey asked.

Her hand pointed toward my countertop, the once-ignored pile of takeout trash becoming apparent to me again. My eyes rolled, bringing my head with it as we split into two different directions across the living room. I sat down on one of the swivel chairs next to the kitchen table.

“Ugh, don’t even get me started about that. I’ve just been busy with...stuff lately,” I said.

“With Lilema?” she asked with a head tilt.

Hailey held up one of the empty boxes toward me, showing me the signature gilded on top that now reflected under the light. The font was crisp, concise, and proved to be a recognizable symbol of my new brand. She pulled it back toward herself to study the small box.

“What? It’s an anagram for my name,” I said. “You don’t like it?”

“Where’s the ‘C?’” she questioned.

“Didn’t need it.”

I watched her put the box back down on the coffee table with the others, standing up now from my chair to walk into the bedroom across the living space. Opening the door, I walked straight to my closet along the side wall, rummaging through to find a new set of pants. Though, after finding my jeans, I turned back toward the door, noticing Hailey standing by it with her phone in hand.

“Hey, turn around,” I said. “I can admit you’re my best friend, but that doesn’t mean you get to see my ass.”

Hailey glanced up with a raised eyebrow, a cute smirk appearing on her face for a moment.

“Oh, so I have to turn around so you can see *my* ass?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes heavier than ever this time, stifling a laugh and an intrusive image. She was too far away to smack her on the head.

“Oh my god, shut up,” I chuckled. “Just turn around.”

She lifted her hands innocently with fake exasperation, her phone displaying her social media feed before she turned around. I changed out of my cargo pants and into the jeans, tossing the baggy pair across the room lazily. Afterward, I planted myself into my twin bed, staring at her distracted figure in the doorway.

For a moment, I looked a little longer. The way her dandelion hair cascaded along both sides of her shoulders. The way her blue band hoodie stood out against the darker walls. Even her figure underneath it all was something difficult to pry my eyes away from. She was tormentingly pretty.

“What are we doing for dinner, dummy?” I asked through my trance.

Hailey shrugged, turning around with her face still glued to the phone. She was reading over something on the screen, the silence proving where her attention lied. I began waving in her direction, the impatience getting the better of me.

“Hello?” I asked. “You there?”

Her head dragged upward before her eyes followed, blinking a few times back into reality.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I was just looking at the new release coming out from Kenzie.”

My chest tightened for a moment, shifting my eyes into a distant glance against the wall beside her. They quickly pulled themselves back to where they needed to be, the light forcibly flourishing back into them.

“You still listen to her?” I asked.

“Well, no duh,” Hailey answered. “I love her, and all her music. She’s still one of my favorite singers.”

“Do you even know her well enough to say you loved her?” I muttered.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, never mind. What is for dinner?”

“Oh, right.”

Hailey pulled her phone up again, swiping around quickly this time as she went through. I turned to lay against the bed, throwing my hands behind my head and pulling a knee into the air. My stomach was growling in anticipation, but I ignored it, pursing my lips in sudden thought.

Distant arguments replayed in my head as I stared blankly at the ceiling’s filtration vent. I tried distracting myself with narrowed eyes, checking to see if it needed to be replaced anytime soon. Though, regardless of the answer, I was going to put it off. There were more important things to deal with instead. And my business wasn’t going to run itself.

“Okay,” she said. “So we’ve got steak, burgers, pizza, pasta —.”

“What’s for burgers?” I asked.

“There’s always Style Burger.”

“Hard pass,” I chuckled.

“You just don’t like them ‘cause they play Kenzie Murano music.”

I shrugged.

“Do you really hate her that much?” she asked.

“I don’t *hate* her. I just don’t like pop music.”

“Riiight, okay. Well there are other burger places we can go to.”

I quickly sat up from the mattress, swinging myself around to touch my feet on the floor once again. The soft carpet felt gratifying beneath my socks, a sudden idea surging through my brain as the energy lifted me into a stand.

“I’ve got a place we can go, but I want to show you something first,” I pitched.

Hailey raised her eyebrow suspiciously, a grin growing on her face as she looked up at me, closing her phone, and putting the pink, rounded rectangle back into her pocket. With a shrug, she crossed her arms, leaning on one hip.

“Alright, captain,” she said. “Show me the way.”

The setting sun gleamed pretty colors against the metallic landscape — silver, black, and blue-accented buildings coated in a warm orange glow, with the streets colored in various cars along the road. Vehicles hovered across the magnetic surface beneath them, carrying people in and out of my vision across town. Streetlights began to power on as the night approached, reminding me of the time limit I had left for my plan.

I walked faster along the sidewalk, leading Hailey past each black streetlight that had yet to power itself on. She kept up as she always did, following my energy as I paced faster, checking down each alley between the buildings we passed by.

“Which one was it?” I muttered to myself.

After a few more pathways, I noticed the familiar, dented garbage container sitting on its own against the wall. My eyes lit up again, giving a hand motion for Hailey to follow as we both went into the partially lit alleyway.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Okay, I’m going to need you to trust me,” I said.

My eyes scanned the area around us, stalking closer to the building as I failed to see anyone in sight. With a smile I took a step upward into the air, placing my foot on a solid, invisible surface before taking another step up.

“Come on,” I said, holding out my hand for her.

“Cam, I can’t see them,” she said.

“Yeah, I know, I’ll guide you. Just follow my steps.”

“Alright, but when someone sees us and you become the government’s test subject, don’t come crying to me.”

“My powers aren’t that dangerous.”

“They don’t have to be. And you don’t even know where you got them from.”

Hailey took my hand, immediately sending chills up my arm that I tried hard to ignore. Part of my focus was spent on trying to keep my hands dry, her lightly calloused skin squeezing mine in a way that made my pulse beat even faster. Though, most of my focus needed to stay on making sure we had enough footing in front of us.

Together, we took step by step into the air, my power creating a tangible surface beneath my foot from the atmosphere around us. My hand held tighter onto her hand, fearful of the moment she might slip and fall. I looked back at her every few seconds, making sure her foot touched the next pad before I took my own step forward. One by one, we made our way to the rooftop of the building, Hailey’s hand shaking in mine as we went up the two stories.

Finally, my foot touched a visible surface, walking onto the roof while still holding onto her hand. She blew out a heavy breath from her mouth, leaning down as if she had just run a marathon, staring at the ground. Slight guilt stabbed at my stomach, but still my lips curved into a habitual smile.

“Still alive?” I asked.

“Barely,” she said. “I thought I was a goner.”

“You didn’t even slip once.”

Hailey pulled herself back up into a stand, releasing her sweaty hand from mine. Whether the awkwardness was from my internalized thoughts or her anxiety, I would never know. She looked back at where we had just come from, already having put several feet of distance between her and the edge.

I could feel my body beginning to shake from the concentration, having lost count of how many steps we took just to get to the top. My friend’s attention was attached to my quivering hand, clenching it as I realized where she had now been looking. Still, she glanced back up at me, ignoring the small detail.

“You’ve gotten pretty good at that for just a year,” she said. “Also, is there even a time limit on those things, or what?”

I smiled, the plethora of platforms created all bursting in symphony. The trash container below us rattled from the aftermath, causing Hailey to jump at the sudden noise. Her hand pulled close to her chest in an instant, the sound echoing within a short vicinity that forced a chuckle to escape the depths of my throat.

“I don’t know,” I said. “If there is, I haven’t found one. All I know is that the more I have at once, the more lightheaded I get.”

“Can’t they explode any quieter?” she asked. “Or just not at all?”

The girl’s hand lowered back down to her side, looking back over the barren alleyway. Her fingers fidgeted to her pants for a moment before they brushed the sweat against the fabric. Another breath was enough to pull her attention back.

“Come on, it wasn’t that loud,” I said.

“Why do they even do that?” Hailey crossed her arms.

“What did you expect would happen to compressed air? You’re the mechanic here, not me. Shouldn’t you know a thing or two about physics?”

“I thought you could just...let it free like a bird or something. It’s just air trapped in air, not in a container.”

“May as well be a container.”

“Okay, Ms. Dropout-who-suddenly-knows-physics,” she said. “What did you want to show me anyway?”

I smacked her arm for the retort, pointing out into the distance after she hit me back. The sun was still coming to a set, draping over the bustling city before our eyes. The light reflected

off of clear building windows, bouncing across the city landscape of different heights that spanned across the expanse, hiding the skyline. We weren't high enough to see everything, but the flashing lights, illuminating street lamps, and holographic billboards fit together in a strangely poetic harmony. I snuck a glance at Hailey who stayed entranced at the sight, the lighting and scenery of awakening night life giving her a view she'd never seen before.

I smiled solemnly at her amazed features, the same light coating over her as well. The image of another girl appeared behind her, my mind playing tricks on me as a distant memory flashed before my view. The phantom's blonde hair transitioned into colored pink by the ends of the familiar girl, flowing in the wind like it always had. She was pretty. Fragile. Her eyes stared blankly off into the view, a guilt bubbling at the bottom of my gut. Her pastel pink shirt accompanied a black skirt that dressed her for the sake of others. I forced myself to look away, putting my focus, instead, on the area in front of me.

"It's really pretty this time of day," I said.

"Yeah, no kidding," Hailey spoke.

For another moment, we both stared into the vast space, sharing the time together in the view amongst the sunset. My heart yearned for something more with her, but it quickly reminded me of the life that I lived. There was no reason to have someone commit to the same fate. My eyes darkened at the thought of my choices, always condemning me further.

"You hungry?" she asked.

I turned to look at her, a smile appearing on my face as my façade resurfaced once more. It felt more genuine when she was around.

"Obviously," I said.

We carefully headed back down the building, taking a shorter time than it did to go up. The trash container rattled again as we turned the corner of the alley, walking quickly away from the sudden noise. We giggled to each other as we walked to the restaurant nearby, heading through the automatic sliding glass.

I took in a deep breath of fresh grease and heavenly beef, the underappreciated diner sending a shock of nostalgia through my entire system. A waved hand-gesture summoned one of the waitresses to us at the front, still wearing their casual, unenforced attire. Her purple skirt flowed as she strolled over, already holding a red, closed tablet beside her navy, buttoned top.

"Just the two of you today?" she asked with a loving grin.

"Yes, please and thank you, Marie," I answered, glancing at her name plate.

With a wider smile, she led us to a booth by the window, placing two tablets down in front of us. We each took hold of the rectangular block, pressing its designated button to watch the two halves gradually separate upward, a blue holographic image appearing between its extended rods. I looked up at Hailey who was already scanning over the menu, putting a finger to her mouth in thought.

"She might be new here," I said.

"What gives you that impression?" she asked.

“It’s not an impression. I’ve just been here enough times to know who does and doesn’t work here.”

“Oh, so you’re like their manager now.”

“God, no. I could never be a manager at a diner. I’ve got my own thing going for me.”

The sound of sizzling ensued in the distance—a familiar sound amongst the light chatter and television—reminding me of simpler times. The place was just as peaceful as I always remembered, enjoying my time even when Hailey wanted to play her usual games.

“Your own thing, huh?” She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “And how safe is that between profits, legal trouble, and general physical safety?”

I gave her a dirty look with slight tongue, ignoring her jabs even if I knew she was right. I was well aware of what I had signed up for, but there was nothing for me past that job.

“It’s *tons* safe,” I joked. “Just a few scuffles here and there.”

“Right, sure.” Hailey made a dramatic eye roll, leaning to one elbow.

We took our time looking over the menu in front of us, though my search was much shorter than hers. My personal goal was to try everything on the menu at least once, and today, I was down to the spinach and mushroom burger. Though however strange they were to put on a sandwich, this wasn’t a place I could complain about.

Once the waitress returned, we both closed our menus and handed them back to her. I leaned back in my seat, putting my arms down in my lap. The ceiling lights still shone brightly above us, each circular space being a spotlight on the customer’s existence. The darkness outside the window was a well-placed contrast to the inner luminosity, watching as stray people passed by on their way home.

I looked back into the white-and-red-painted space, seeing Hailey scrolling through her phone as she usually did. I pretended as if my eyes had x-ray vision, looking through the opaque blue hologram to the other side of the screen only to smile to myself. As I looked back up, my eyes caught a glance at her darkening face. Her thumb stopped scrolling and my brows furrowed, watching as her stare grew wider by the second.

“Oh god,” she muttered, the usual joyful tone gone from her voice. “Kenzie’s...dead?”

Everything around me froze suddenly, my gaze tunneling into her figure as I lost focus on anything else. My heart quickened in an instant, the fear prodding in the back of my eyes as the room around me started to waver. For a moment I couldn’t move, twitching my fingers to make sure I still had some control. I couldn’t feel myself breathing.

“She’s what?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It says they found her body at her house I think. I don’t really get how—”

I snatched the phone from her hand, skimming over the screen at the article she was reading. It was on a breaking news headline, the image blurred heavily around her silhouette. The girl was revealed to have been found dead in her home, her entire body decayed in one of the closets. I scratched at my head, fighting back the gradual tears that welled into my eyes. The

pounding in my chest finally reached my throat, leg shaking as I scanned through as much as I could as quickly as I was able to.

“I know you said you don’t really like pop music,” Hailey said lowly. “So I know you may not have liked her that much, but—”

“I did,” I choked. “She was my fucking sister.”