

## Allure

No one really knows why restoration stopped on the abandoned St. Julian hotel, where commoners and kings once came to relax in luxury. Well, at least they claimed commoners and kings could afford it. No one I knew ever could. One day, the work just stopped. I remember it sitting vacant for years. It hadn't been operational since I was a teenager. The restoration had started out of nowhere and stopped just as quickly. There were always strange things about the St. Julian. Sometimes, I think back to when I was a child, when everything seemed to move so much slower. Every day felt like a new beginning. Rumors about the St. Julian were on every kid's lips, urban legends we all thought we understood. I wasn't entirely truthful when I said, 'No one really knows...' People had their theories. Even at a young age, I'd heard the stories and the rumors of what happened there.

The St. Julian was something that had been talked about in hushed whispers all throughout my life. I heard that about once a year a huge mass of people would come into town. They would rent out every room at the St. Julian. It was always the same day, July 16th. Right there in the middle of the year, these masses would flood into our small town. They would go eat at our restaurants. They would go shopping at our stores. Then they would retreat back into the St. Julian. To do what? That's the question.

A lot of the kids thought it was a private club, some sort of sex club. They'd come in, have their fun, and leave. Then they'd go back to their lives like none of it ever happened. They'd see these people that they had shared time with here, but they would never speak of it afterward. This is just what we hypothesized. We had no evidence. It was strange. Our town was about the epitome of "All American Suburbia," and yet something like this happened once a year. Most adults just seemed fine with it. To them, it was just something that happened once a year. It was almost a tradition.

Why didn't anyone ask these people what they were doing? Well, that's easy to answer. The mayor told everyone not to. He said he didn't want to lose the business. July 16th and 17th of each year were the biggest days of the year for our town's restaurants and local shops. Some of these businesses probably wouldn't still be around without them. No one wanted to scare these people off, no matter what they were doing. I remember the day I broke the sacred rule.

I was a teenager, just eighteen at the time, still working at the local pizza parlor, Jammin' Joey's. I was at that age where nothing was sacred, nothing couldn't be questioned or lampooned. It was almost closing time on that fateful night that comes by once a year. I was cleaning up when they came in. It was an older man with a brown beard and a full head of hair. I could tell he was old (well old to me at the time), but he still had a very youthful charm about him. He'd seen a lot, yet it hadn't worn him down like it did the other men I met every day. As he came in, I saw him holding the door. Then I saw her.

I'd never seen a woman so beautiful. I saw her black hair first, the waviness swaying as it moved around the corner. She was wearing a black top with a matching black skirt. This woman was all in black. Well, except for her lips, which shone a bright red. She definitely had her style. She looked right at me when she walked through the threshold and just that alone made my heart sink. I was mesmerized.

They quietly strolled up to the counter, the woman's gaze never breaking with my own. "How are you guys doing tonight? What can I get you?" I asked, trying to sound normal. I was more scared than I had ever before. The woman looked at me strangely. She had a little sly smile on her face. Her eyes were big, as big as the oceans, and she was smiling with them. I could feel myself blushing already. The man was looking at the menu. The woman put her elbows on the counter and leaned forward, still looking at me. Her neckline was plunging, and I won't deny it, it caught my gaze. I think she wanted me to look. I think she was having fun. She pointed two fingers at me and motioned for me to raise my eyes. I felt the blood rush to my face. I had been caught, and I didn't know anything about what these people were about. I quickly

looked at the floor, trying to forget what had just happened. Suddenly, the man spoke up “Yeah, I’m not seeing anything that’s really jumping out at me. What do most people order here? You got any special local pizzas or something?”. “Well, the Pepperoni Jones is probably our best seller, dumb name I know. Nothing fancy—just a lot of pepperoni and a bit of spice,” I replied, just grateful that something had broken the tension of the moment. “Yeah, we’ll go with that,” he said. After a beat, he asked, “Is there a liquor store around here? I need to grab a few drinks.”. “Yeah, Johnny’s is just a couple spots to the left when you walk out the door.” I responded. “How long do you think this pizza is going to take to make?”, he asked. “Give me about 15 minutes, and it will be done”, I responded. The man turned to the woman and told her he’d be back in a few minutes, and to wait for him.

I headed to the back to get the order started. Everybody else had already gone home for the night. I had turned on the closed sign even before they walked in. I guess I had just forgotten to lock the door. There was no way I was going to waste this opportunity to learn something though. I wanted them to be there. As I got the dough ready, I kept looking through the racks at the woman walking around the dining room. I wanted to say something to her so badly, but I was terrified. I’d only first seen her five minutes ago, and I could already tell you she was the most alluring but also the scariest woman I’d ever met.

I thought I heard her say something, but I couldn’t make out what she said. I thought maybe she was on one of those new cellular phones or something so I kept working. I continued looking at her from the back behind the ovens. She didn’t seem to be on a phone. Maybe she had been talking to me. I threw their pizza into the oven and made my way back out to the counter. She was looking at pictures on the walls from all the birthday parties we hosted here. Suddenly, she spoke. “It seems like you guys have a lot of fun here. You’ve brought joy to a lot of young people’s lives. To you, it’s just another day at work though. I think about things like that a lot.”. She turned her head from the picture and smiled again in that same seductive way she did earlier. It felt like she was going to eat me alive, and to be honest, I would have let her. I was

hypnotized. I knew these were the things in life that had lasting repercussions, the kinds of the things that get you in trouble. "You don't seem like you've had too many birthdays yourself. What are you? Fifteen or Sixteen? No, I guess not Fifteen, they'd never let you work this late." She moved closer to the counter and leaned over it, just like she did earlier when I got caught staring. She definitely wanted me to stare.

I'd never seen a woman like her, the attitude she exuded, the curves that commanded attention, the aura that radiated from her entire being. I'd do anything for just five minutes with her. I knew I would. "No, I actually just turned eighteen a couple of weeks ago." I responded to what I thought was a question she was asking. It might have been rhetorical. Looking back, I'm still not sure. She reached out and touched the front of my uniform, and my face went beet red. I didn't move because I liked where this was going. I guess I love to sabotage myself because that's when I blurted it out. "You're one of the people that goes up to St. Julian every year, right? What do you guys do up there?". She pulled her fingers back from my uniform and looked at the floor. When she raised her face back up, I could see she was smiling. A little laugh came out of her perfectly designed mouth, out of her perfectly colored lips. "I've been coming in a long time, probably longer than you've been alive, and no local has ever asked me that. I never understood why. I figured people wanted to know." She spoke in a kind of relieved tone. "It's funny. I never thought it would be someone as young as you."

Then came the most awkward ten seconds of my life. I stood there, her gaze fixed on me, neither of us saying a word. I could hear my own heartbeat, but not hers. "What time do you close?" she asked. "Well, technically, we're already closed. You guys were the last customers for the night." "You got school tomorrow?" "Nah, it's still summer..." I muttered, feeling the nerves creep in. "Well, the only way to know what we do is to see it for yourself. You might have to sleep in a little tomorrow. That's about the worst that'll happen. How carefree it is to be young."

Right then, her male companion walked back through the door. "I got the alcohol. How's the pizza? We've got to get going." "Pizza's got a few minutes," I said, not looking up. "We can't really wait. I'll pay for it. Just give it away or something. We've got a place we've gotta be." He glanced at Selene. She looked at him, then turned her gaze back to me. "Charles, I think we might have company tonight. This young man wants to know what happens at the St. Julian when we come to town." Charles raised an eyebrow. "You really think that's a good idea, Selene? This kid's a local. Locals don't know anything about what happens. Hell, they don't even want to know." Selene's smile tightened, that sly, knowing grin she'd already given me so many times tonight. She didn't break eye contact. "This one does."

The next thing I knew, I was shutting off the lights and locking up the restaurant. My car was parked in the back, but I figured I'd come back for it later. The man, Charles I'm assuming, pulled their luxury town car up to the curb to pick us up. I climbed into the back seat, and to my surprise, the woman joined me. Even now, I don't know why I didn't jump out then and there. I knew it was bad news. But my teenage brain wasn't running on logic. I could feel my heart in my chest beating wildly. I was somewhere between being deathly afraid and euphoric. It was quite a feeling, something I've never really felt again since that night.

The man pulled away from the curb. The seats in front of me were tall enough that I couldn't see where we were going. For all I knew, we weren't headed to the St. Julian at all. I might have been on my way to an early grave somewhere, about to get executed and buried without a trace. I didn't know these people. How had I ended up here? It was lust. That's what it was. Lust had brought me to my knees, and in that moment, it could have dragged me anywhere. I just wanted to be near her.

She was already close, but then she moved even closer, until our sides were touching. There was the whole backseat to stretch out in, and this was where she chose to be. Streetlights smeared across the windows, spilling flickers of light into the cabin. Sometimes the

light flashed for only a second. Sometimes it felt like it lasted forever. I didn't want to look at her. I didn't know what she was doing, but I had a feeling she was staring right at me. Then I felt her hand on my thigh. I kept my eyes fixed on the window. An audience seemed to peer back at me between the bursts of passing light. I saw their faces, and they cheered for more. This was something both they and I wanted. Her hand slid further between my legs, and I didn't stop her. I couldn't. I wasn't sure I was even in control anymore. I didn't want to be. I would have died for just a second of bliss with this woman.

I kept staring out the window. I was too scared and too ashamed to meet her eyes. She could feel how aroused I was, and she took advantage of it, touching me in all the ways I'd imagined and more. Then she unbuttoned my pants and pulled what controlled my mind at that moment into the open. Panic sparked somewhere deep inside me. What if her husband looked back and saw? Was that even her husband? I didn't know. I didn't know anything. I was in a car with strangers, caught in a moment I couldn't explain and couldn't escape. And I was in the most vulnerable position I'd ever been in in my young life. Suddenly, I felt a moment of bliss that I had never experienced before and have never experienced again. I felt her lips wrap around my most prized physical possession. Her tongue moved all over it in all the best ways. I stopped looking out the window and leaned back in the seat. I let my head rest on the top of the back seat. I closed my eyes and just concentrated as she gave me everything I've ever wanted. I never wanted this feeling to end. Seconds later, a fountain of euphoria brought me to the threshold of heaven.

As she lifted her head, my mind was still spinning, caught in that strange, weightless place between bliss and confusion. But in the next flash of streetlight I swear I saw her face change. For just a second she wasn't the woman who had just touched me; she was a haggard old crone, her eyes sunken, skin hanging loose over sharp bones, half her teeth rotted away. Then came another burst of light through the window and her face shifted again, now young,

radiant, almost glowing. But there were fangs where her perfect teeth should've been, and the smile she gave me was hungry, like I wasn't just a passenger anymore. I was an offering.

With another flash, the beautiful woman I saw before had returned. But instead of relief, what washed over me was a deeper sense of dread. Now I realized I didn't know what was going to happen next. Around that time, I felt the car slow to a stop. We weren't moving anymore. I watched the man reach into the glove compartment and pull something out before stepping out of the vehicle. The woman grabbed my hand and led me out of the backseat. And even after everything that had happened, I still would have followed her anywhere.

As we stepped out, I realized where we were. This wasn't the St. Julian. It was the drainage ditch on the edge of town. I remembered kids talking about catching fish here and actually eating them. Even back then, I thought that was insane. That's when I saw it, what the man had taken from the glove compartment. A pistol. That's when the fear really started to settle in.

"Okay, kid. This is the end of the line. I hope you enjoyed what Selene gave you. It was your one taste of heaven before it all goes black," the man said. "Get on your knees." I stood there. "Get on your knees!" he shouted, waving the gun. My knees hit the ground. I was shaking. Somehow, I managed to get out a few words. "Who are you people? Why are you doing this?" The woman stepped in front of me. The man moved behind. "Worship her," he said. "Right here, right now. I want you to worship her like the goddess she is." I asked again, "Why are you doing this?" His answer came fast. Flat. Cold. "Because we can." She bent down so that our eyes met. She smiled in a way only an angel or a devil smiles. Something so alluring. It was so powerful that it was something that would make logic and reason go out the window. "Bow down to me," she whispered, her voice like velvet. "I am everything you need. I am everything you want. " "Would you die for me?" Her question came softly, but with a weight that crushed

everything else. "Would you kill for me?" "Yes", I said with no hesitation. Strangely, I meant it too. I would have done anything for her. Even this, even what the man was doing to me now, I would have done this for her.

She pulled out a vial, its contents a pale pink liquid that seemed to shimmer in the dim light. "Drink this", she said as she handed it to me. I looked at it for what seemed like forever, but I think it might have only been a few seconds. "Drink it. You're going to die tonight. You might as well die high as hell." The man behind me said. "Drink it kid. It's going to make everything ok." he continued. The goddess looked at me. She looked so reassuring. "Would I ever lie to you about what's good for you?", she asked. I opened up the vial and swallowed its contents. The universe opened up and swallowed me whole.

I never did find out what the people did at the St. Julian every year. The next day, the place burned down after all the visitors had left. People say it was a kitchen fire. My dad found me in the front yard, caked in mud, as he was leaving for work that morning. My car, the one I thought I'd left at the pizza parlor, was sitting on the curb in front of our house. My keys were in my pocket. I checked the floor mats, but there was no trace of mud. Everything seemed normal again, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed. Something I couldn't quite explain. Something that would never let me fully leave that night behind. And when I close my eyes, I can still see her faces: the beautiful woman, the old crone, the hungry smile. Even now, as an old man, they haunt me, lingering at the edges of my mind, no matter how hard I try to forget.

