

Bloody Pining

Mr. Tally was a vampire, that much Solomon Abrams already knew. What he didn't know was what Mr. Tally did to Dustin Powell.

Blue Springs, Texas, wasn't the kind of place a vampire would care to rest. Compassion and godliness were as common as the pine trees that surrounded their little town, yet on every patrol, there he'd see Evan Tally, strolling about the town in his high-heeled boots. Mr. Tally dressed like Solomon's grandfather; suede bell-bottoms, ugly patterned jacket, casting a gossamer smile to the locals, never waving his gloved hands outside the shadows of his lacy parasol. He was good-looking, a little too good-looking for Solomon's taste. Handsome face, glossy black curls, and skin like his mama's porcelain bowls. He wore a frilly neck scarf, too. If Solomon would bet his entire paycheck, he'd find two perfect puncture wounds if he could rip the damn thing off, though he never got close enough.

"Nothing good ever comes from men who dress like sissies," he told Dustin on one of their graveyard shifts, their patrol car parked behind the old Sugarmill billboard Solomon's father used to hide behind.

Solomon was twenty-six, a hard-jawed, strong-willed man who grew into his daddy's boots, never going more than a hundred miles out of Blue Springs. His job was simple, virtuous even. Make his rounds and catch speeders and drunk lovers in their cars. That was all he had to watch for before Tally came around.

"Or he's just eccentric, and you're obsessive," Dustin would quip back from beside him, checking the radar and records. His brows always loosened when the subject of Tally came about, and no matter what Solomon said, Dustin wouldn't budge.

Dustin was like a brother to Solomon. He was younger than him, smaller too, lean with a mop of sandy blonde hair that hadn't changed since they were kids. They grew up on the same street, went to the same school, sat in the back pew every Sunday, and spied on the girls they liked, though Solomon was always a bit more interested than Dustin. They used to agree on everything, until Mr. Tally came around.

"Retro fashion is making a comeback, you know. I think he wears it nicely," Dustin shrugged whenever Solomon made fun of Tally's clothes.

Dustin always had excuses for him. Tally never stands in the sunlight? Tally has a skin condition. Never seen Tally eat anything? Tally makes his meals at home. Solomon noticed Dustin seemed to know a lot more about Tally than he let on, and cornered his companion into revealing he'd spoken to Mr. Tally before. On a few occasions, actually, mainly to ease Solomon's paranoia.

"Drop it, Sol," Dustin finally scorned on their last patrol together. "Tally's a good fellow. You're chasing ghosts."

Then Dustin disappeared, and it seemed ghosts were all Solomon could chase.

Dustin didn't leave a note, nor a text, nor a letter. Not even his family knew where he went, prayers going up for the missing son that fateful September Sunday. Their unit didn't investigate Dustin's disappearance, however. They claimed it was voluntary, stating he resigned before he left, but Solomon knew Dustin better than anyone. Police work was Dustin's dream, and Blue Springs was his heart, same as Solomon's

He watched Tally like a hawk after that, spending his evenings parked outside Tally's manor, where he was that fateful night. Endercott Manor was an old Victorian home that had been abandoned for years, bought up and renovated by Tally two summers back. A summer

home, Tally called it, where briar thorns and roses grew like a disease in the mossy flower beds. The manor was tall, imposing stone and black slats, all the iron windows black as the starry sky except for one. The living room was lit by a single candle, where Solomon caught the edge of Tally's curls behind a velvet armchair. He had a large tome in his slender hands, a glass of red liquid beside him.

Solomon's knuckles went white on the steering wheel, his grinding teeth practically sparking. He knew Tally was guilty.

Gossip wasn't hard to come by in a town like Blue Springs; in fact, Tally was often the favorite subject of the locals. The women called him charming, the men called him dangerous, the elders called him a fairy, and the deacons never saw him attend a church. He never even accepted a Bible when they handed it to him. A month ago, Solomon got a lead. Sam Bueler, a drunk and shut-in, admitted he saw Dustin and Tally together, walking down the old Manona trails behind his farm, speaking in hushed tones. It was the night before Dustin resigned.

"It'll be over soon," Sam heard Tally say, Solomon going cold when Sam claimed he watched the man kiss Dustin's neck, the officer's eyes dazed as if enchanted by the devil himself.

With Sam's shaky testimony, Solomon took the warrant and went to Endercott Manor himself. He knocked once. The door opened, and there stood Tally— in Dior heels and a long black skirt. Solomon's face went white, but that sly cat simply stretched himself out in the doorway, smirking like he was trying to get under Solomon's skin.

He placed the handcuffs behind Tally's back, noting the man's cold wrists and ignoring the bitter heat flashing over his face. The interrogation brought up more frustrations than

answers. He was forced to let Tally go, but he knew a guilty man when he saw one. Most called him crazy, a few believed him. Solomon knew he had to take action into his own hands.

His patrol car was dark that October night, parked in the woods not far from Endercott Manor. His tools were beside him in the empty passenger seat, silver bullets loaded into his Glock 19. He'd spent a fortune on them and anything else that the witch said he needed.

He would be damned if he let that vampire take away his beloved friend.

Tally's night wasn't that unusual for the most part.

A glass of chilled AB-positive sat beside him, a loose scarlet silk robe the only thing covering his lithe frame. He was reading an 18th-century edition of King Lear, sad the ninnies changed the original with their *moral corrections*, but given his first edition crumbled to dust some time ago, there was little he could do.

Twilight was on the small box TV in the corner. He left it on for curiosity's sake, amused by what they thought of his kind. Sadly, if he wanted to sparkle in the sunlight, it'd take an enormous amount of body glitter, and you know, not being turned to dust. He rarely drank human blood, but he had connections to get the good kind, expensive, but god knows he wouldn't ingest any of the inbred locals. In truth, cows' blood was the easiest to get hold of. Texas was full of cattle ranches. Many of the cows didn't mind him taking a little off the top, nor did the ranchers notice the punctures.

Tally watched the dour-looking girl climb onto the back of her glittering counterpart, unamused but a bit envious. Physical gifts took centuries to develop, and even at the ripe age of five hundred and twenty, the most Tally had to show was perfect skin and better-than-average senses, though he knew himself to be much tougher than most baby vamps. He rolled his eyes.

He wasn't sure if he was more irritated by the stale acting or the fact that Bella's handsome father wasn't a more prominent character.

He heard Solomon's car door shut. Tally was being watched, *again*. Dustin was fine, better than fine, actually. While Tally did have something to do with his *disappearance*, he'd have thought Solomon would give up the ghost by now. Dustin *clearly* didn't want to be found, but did Solomon move on? No, that required rationality, the kind a stalker cop with a god complex didn't possess.

He shook his head. Small-town men never learned.

A ping of glass rang out from the kitchen.

Tally froze, ears perked. He ate most of the mice in the home some time ago, and other than Dustin, there was not another creature in that house, and certainly not in the kitchen.

He set his book aside, annoyed. If it was Solomon, he'd better deal with this now. His little game had gone on long enough.

The vampire eased himself out of his chair, stalking down the wooden flats. He was stronger, stronger than most men, and believed in his chances in a confrontation.

The tall wooden door to the kitchen was shut, locked as he had left it. The door was elegant, arched with a thick marble frame that collected more dust than he'd like. His brows set. He knew what he needed to do. The knob clicked louder than Tally wanted it to; he peered around the corner. He could see in the dark, yet saw nothing, not even in the blind spot beside the door. The wrap-around cabinets were untouched, his marble island the same as he left it, fake fruit as dusty as ever in their bowl.

One of his wine glasses was knocked over, lying on its side in the middle of the island. It was a 19th-century original! Tally would never leave it in such a state!

Tally scowled but crept inside, slowly closing the door when he heard the clicking of metal from atop the door frame.

“Don’t. Move.”

Tally laughed and put up his hands. He had to maintain face after all.

“Solomon, I should have known. If you wanted to see me in my bathrobe, you could have just—”

A weight dropped to the floorboards, a cord of beads wrapping around Tally’s throat. They burned! A rosary? He gasped, the cord yanking him backwards. A rough hand shoved cloth over his mouth, a cold gun barrel burrowing into the back of his curls. His eyes fluttered wide, Solomon grabbing his jaw tightly, his palm swallowing half of Tally’s face.

“Blessed silver bullets,” Solomon chuckled slowly, loading a round into the chamber. Tally gasped, grabbing Solomon’s arm on instinct. “You scream or move even an inch away from me, I’ll blow your head off. You understand?”

Tally froze, muffled cries escaping the cloth and Solomon’s iron grip. How did the cop ambush him so easily? He’d spent decades dodging men like Solomon. Tally squeezed his eyes shut, accepting his fate. He nodded.

“Good.” Solomon dropped the rag. Tally gasped before he was whipped around and forced out the door, Solomon’s fist tight around the rosary, looping his throat.

Tally struggled to march forward with the beads sizzling his flesh. He knew Solomon was crazy, but Tally didn’t think he knew what he was. He wasn’t able to process it as Solomon marched him into his dining room, whipping out a chair and shoving Tally in, pulling cords from his belt. Tally was dazed, the pain intensifying as more burning restraints pinned him to his own chair. He hissed, trying to escape when Solomon struck him across the face.

“You gonna focus now? Freak?” The man growled, chuckling as Tally’s eyes finally met his attacker’s, Solomon’s piercing blue eyes cutting through the dark. The vampire sneered, trying to straighten up and salvage his dignity, but his chest heaved.

“Open your mouth,” Solomon commanded, lowering the gun against Tally’s forehead.

Tally kept his eyes on Solomon and complied, parting his lips but not enough to show his teeth. The cop stashed his gun and grabbed Tally’s face, forcing his jaw open. He didn’t see fangs, not until he ran his fingers across Tally’s gums, guiding out his fangs like a vet extending a cat’s claw.

“I knew it,” Solomon growled. Tally whipped his head away, clamping his mouth shut. “You think I’d let you go around enchanting half the town and not do something about it?” Solomon growled, lifting Tally’s Chin with the barrel of his gun. Tally gulped but held his brave look and his tongue.

“Where is Dustin?” The cop asked slowly.

Upstairs. That’s where Dustin was, in the second guest bedroom, where he’d been resting for the past week. Tally’s eyes darted to the staircase, but he pulled them back, realizing his mistake too late.

“You think I got all day?” Solomon bellowed, pulling a knife from his belt, the silver blade glowing in the moonlight. The vampire could feel the holy energy like a hot brand as Solomon grabbed his curls, the knife inches away from his cheek. Tally strained away from it.

“I got a lot more blessed toys, vampire.” Solomon threatened, “I have no problem flaying every inch of your miserable hide until you talk.”

Tally froze. There was no point dying, not if Dustin would wake up alone and confused. Or worse, Solomon finds him first. A bargain had to be struck, Tally praying to the god who damned him, this wouldn't go sour. He stopped fighting, bowing his head.

“If I show you, will you spare him?” Tally whispered.

“Is this gonna be a trick?” Solomon asked. Tally shook his head, bright green eyes meeting Solomon's.

“No tricks. I promise.”

Solomon believed him.

He cuffed Tally before dropping the rosary, the vampire hissing as the silver cuffs branded red bracelets into its skin. They were blessed, but less damaging than the rosary. Solomon took the Rosary off for cooperation but kept a hand around Tally's arm, his gun in the other as the vampire led him up the stairs. They approached a rustic doorway. Tally turned his head back, his brows winced, and he pleaded.

“He's in there, just, please, keep an open mind. He knew you wouldn't take it well and—”

“Shut the hell up!” Solomon growled, tightening his grip on Tally before throwing open the door.

The room was the nicest thing Solomon had seen in that damn manor, mainly because it was bare. A fire crackled to his right in a hearth, shadows dancing across the carved ceiling beams. Two towering velvet curtains kept the world away, hiding the darkened room from view. There wasn't much in the way of furniture, except for two nightstands accompanying a four-poster bed. A figure rested atop. Dustin Powell.

Solomon's eyes went wide.

He threw Tally to the ground before racing to his friend. Dustin's hands were tucked carefully over his stomach, eyes shut as if asleep, but his chest didn't rise and fall. His once tan skin was ashy and waxen, and a bandage wrapped over his neck. Solomon rested his head against Dustin's chest, but nothing could be heard. Fear raced cold up Solomon's spine.

"Check the nightstand! He drafted notes to you, before he... I did this to him. Read the folded one! He knew you wouldn't understand, and he knew you wouldn't believe me, so he wrote just in case!" The monster pleaded, desperate glance landing on the right nightstand drawer.

Solomon ripped it open and found several pieces of scrap letter, finding the folded one on top just as the monster described. *To Solomon*, was written across the back in Dustin's hand. Solomon unfolded it and read it carefully.

Dustin didn't know how to tell Solomon; he never knew how. He looked up to Solomon ever since they were kids. He tried to be what his friend wanted, joined the police academy because he knew it was Solomon's dream for both of them. Everyone expected him to be a certain way: his mother, his daddy, everyone he ever knew, and Solomon most of all. But Dustin couldn't live a lie anymore.

He wasn't straight. Never was. He realized who he was back in church when Solomon hand-picked his beauties, but Dustin only saw him. Mary-Ann, Taylor, Jessica, the girls he pursued over the years were lies; girls he knew didn't like him back, hand-picked to throw Solomon off the scent. Dustin cared for Solomon, maybe even loved him, but knew he was too blind to see who he was, much less accept what he'd become.

It's why he came to Tally. Tally was a fascination of his, a strange enigma that flew into his small town world. He'd seen men like Tally in larger cities, but every time Solomon pointed out Tally, it only intrigued him. He was enthralled when he met Tally in person, even happier to realize Tally had noticed him too, the pair spending every night in bliss. He knew what Tally was, but he knew he wasted so much of his own life living a lie. Tally promised all the time the world to live as he wanted, to stay by his side as long as Dustin saw fit. Dustin accepted. He quit his job and planned to leave town as soon as his transformation was complete.

He loved Tally and prayed Solomon could forgive them both.

Solomon stood still for a long time, the note in a shaking grasp. Dustin betrayed him. Tally wrenched himself upright, the holy noose still tight around his neck. It was hard to do anything with the dizzying pain of his burns, much less with his hands bound.

"H-he's not dead," Tally assured. "He's... in between death and life, like I am. It takes a moon cycle to transform, but h-he'll be awake soon. He can explain this all to you himself! You just have to be patient."

"...You killed him."

Rage ignited in Solomon's chest, his huffing breath escaping his clenched teeth like a kettle. He whipped around, pupils like pinpricks. Tally froze.

"Didn't you read? He wanted to get away from this! From you!" Tally yelled. "This town was killing him. He wanted an out, so I gave it to him!"

The pathetic creature scrambled backwards as Solomon marched toward him. He tried to squirm away, but Solomon caught him by the throat. Tally writhed under his grip as Solomon lifted him off the ground, his legs kicking uselessly.

“You turned him... into a monster!” Solomon demanded, his fists shaking with rage.

Tally choked, managing a smirk.

“Yes... I did. And I regret nothing,” Tally managed to smirk, his haunting laugh filling the darkened room.

Solomon sneered and whipped his gun around.

Tally screamed.

He fired.

A hole appeared in the center of Dustin’s forehead. A stream of black blood trailed down his peaceful face. Tears streamed down Tally’s face.

“You horrid bastard, you killed him!” Tally wailed, fighting like mad before the gun was turned on him. His eyes went wide as Solomon fired. Tally’s world went out like a light.

Alan Jackson played on the car’s dashboard as Solomon drove past I-49, the dark road smooth as he looked for his turn by the deer crossing sign. He’d ditched his previous clothes, going for the backup set in his trunk. He’d have to burn his clothes, but that would have to wait til he got there. He called his uncle not too long ago, and after not too long, his uncle said he’d get his tractor. He had a plot ready for Solomon, and in the trunk he had something to bury.

He turned onto the low gravel roads, hearing the dead weight hitting the back before slowing down in the grass. A small house came into view, a fresh mound of dirt out past the north forty. He pulled up to it slow.

The car door slammed shut as Solomon rounded the back, popping the trunk with a sneer. Wrapped in loose silk was the creature, curls cast over his once bright eyes.

He knew what he needed to do.

He hoisted the creature over his back and trudged toward the pit. He dropped the creature. Tally landed on his back, pale skin glowing in the moonlight, his robes spread around him like cardinal wings. Black blood trickled from his forehead, but to Solomon's displeasure, they hadn't pierced as deep as he would have liked.

The cop glanced at that creature, the thing that had stolen his friend, his partner.

Dustin would be given a proper funeral; Solomon would see to that. He'd save Dustin's name, burn his letter, and pin the murder on Tally. After all, who would find him? Dustin died an innocent man; the monster was slain. All would be right in Solomon's world. It was a bet Solomon was willing to take. Better to bury the past than to let it change what he knew. He hated that creature to the depth of his core, the unnatural other that had ruined his life.

He grabbed the shovel beside the mound of dirt, getting a good shovel full of red Texas earth.

He shoveled furiously,

Not noticing the vampire twitch.