Editor’s Note: When Richelle first sat down to write Bloodlines, each chapter was narrated by a different character. This is Adrian’s lost story.
Adrian Ivashkov was not having a good twenty-first birthday.

Hitting the legal drinking age wasn’t a big deal to him, seeing as he’d been sneaking alcohol from his parents’ liquor cabinet since he was thirteen. Before long, sneaking wasn’t even necessary. Charm and status could get him a drink in almost any bar—vampire or human. That had certainly proven true last night, judging by the hangover he had today. He’d had one yesterday too. And the day before that. In fact, Adrian was pretty sure he’d been on a liquid diet for the last few weeks. It was getting hard to tell where one hangover ended and another began.

Part of the “liquid diet” was blood, of course. He needed it for normal survival, and it actually helped with the hangovers. Well, kind of. Stepping outside his parents’ townhouse now, he winced as the last light of the setting sun hit his overly sensitive eyes, promptly triggering a headache in the back of his skull. What time was it? Seven? Eight? Whatever it was, he’d slept in late, which was fine by him. The light would be gone that much sooner, and there’d be few people over at the feeders. Adrian had long stopped caring about what others thought of him, but that didn’t mean he wanted to face the mixed looks of scorn and pity he received so much lately.

Getting up late also meant he hadn’t had to see his parents before they’d left. He had little interest in speaking to them most of the time anyway—particularly his father—and certainly not on the day his mother was being sentenced for perjury and theft. Not that Adrian was too worried about her. Lady Daniella Ivashkov wouldn’t see the inside of a cell. She’d be fined, maybe given some community service. Her status would protect her from anything more than that, and really, with the murder and other law-breaking going on around here lately, her crimes were the least of anyone’s worries.

As he walked across one of the wide, beautifully manicured lawns that comprised the heart of the Moroi Royal Court, Adrian couldn’t help but wonder if his mother would still remember that it was
his birthday. She usually did (being very meticulous about writing important dates down in her appointment book) and would magnanimously tell him to “pick out something nice” for himself. Then she would always remind his father, who would give Adrian some gruff well-wishes, promptly followed by a lecture on how Adrian should figure out what he was going to do with his life.

Aunt Tatiana had never lectured him, though. She had remembered his birthday every year, with no prompting, and had always given him a hand-picked present. As queen of the Moroi, she’d never shopped for the presents personally, of course, but she’d always given her servants very specific instructions on what she wanted to give him. Her gifts were always extravagant and pretty, with little practical use. “Just like you,” she’d once teased him. Last year, she’d given him ruby-encrusted cufflinks. Recalling that day, Adrian frowned and wondered where the cufflinks were now. He’d never expected to wear them much and had been careless. But then he’d never expected her to die either.

He’d find them later, he decided. After he got blood from the feeders. And after a drink, of course. He couldn’t start his birthday off without a drink, and besides, he owed a toast to the only person who, if still alive, would have known that it was a special day.

“Happy birthday.”

Adrian came to a sudden halt. The words were soft and small, spoken tentatively, but easily discerned by vampire ears. Slowly, he turned around and found Jill Mastrano standing shyly before him. She was tall for her age—fifteen, if he recalled correctly—and managed her long limbs with an uncertain grace that made her seem coltish and taller still. Her hair was a mass of long, light-brown curls, and her eyes, watching him nervously, were the color of polished jade.

“Little Jill,” he said, putting on a smile that came second-nature to him, no matter how irritable he felt or how much his head pounded. He shuffled toward her, moving into the shade of an apple tree that blocked out most of the western sky. “Who on earth are you talking to?”

“You,” she said. A small smile crept over her face, and some of her shyness abated. “Don’t
“What makes you so sure? Do I look older? That’s a cruel, cruel thing to say. Next you’ll be telling me I’m going gray. You’re a heartbreaker, Mastrano. A real heartbreaker.”

Adrian itched to leave. The feeders called to him, his body begging for the warm, salty taste of human blood. Then—scotch. Yes. That was what he wanted afterward. But Jill was one of the few—very few—people he wasn’t mad at lately, and he was curious about how she knew it was his birthday when no one else did. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and his lighter, hoping one vice might take away the craving of another.

At the word “heartbreaker,” Jill’s pale cheeks had turned bright pink. He shouldn’t have said that, he realized. He wasn’t oblivious. He knew Jill had had a crush on him for a while, one he hoped she’d outgrown, since nothing could ever come of it. There were only a few lines Adrian wouldn’t cross. Fifteen-year-old girls were one of them. He shouldn’t encourage her. He’d even tried to stop using her old nickname: Jailbait. Still, flirting was an unconscious habit for him, and it often crept out.

“You told me,” she explained. “You told a group of us. A long time ago. At St. Vladimir’s. We were hanging out one day, and I had a horoscope book and was looking everyone up. You’re a Leo. Outgoing. Showy. Confident. Arro—“

She bit her lip abruptly, and he laughed. “You can say it. Arrogant. An arrogant bastard.”

“No! I don’t think you are,” she said adamantly, eyes widening. “Not at all. I mean, it’s just a bunch of stars.”

Her words stirred up an odd mix of feelings in him, both good and bad. It was nice to see her like this, the way she used to be: an innocent, shy girl given to bursts of excitement and rambling. He’d seen very little of that in her lately. More remarkable still, he could guess who had been in that “group of us,” and out of all of them, only she had noted his birthday. Flattering. Sad.
“Well,” he told her, after taking a long drag of his cigarette, “the stars are right, and so are you. It is my birthday.”

She beamed. “Are you going to have a party?”

He carefully kept his expression exactly the same, casual and wry. “Nah, what’s special ’bout it? Every day’s a party for me. No point in dragging people out on a weeknight.”

Also no point in mentioning that his friends were probably too preoccupied to do anything anyway. Aunt Tatiana, he thought. Aunt Tatiana would have had me over for dinner. He supposed if he really wanted to celebrate, he could find any number of “friends”—particularly female ones—more than happy to enjoy an impromptu party tonight. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea—but not one for Jill’s delicate sensibilities.

“Besides,” he added grandly, “I’m sure you couldn’t make it. Bet you’ve got some hot date tonight, huh?”

Something in her face shifted, the infatuated, eager expression dimming a little. Her nervous mode returned, and Adrian felt his eyebrows rise. This was unexpected.

“You do have a date!”

Jill slowly shook her head. “No. Not that … not that kind. I’m having dinner with … with L- lissa and my family.” Her lips had difficulty forming the name. “We’re going to discuss my, um, future.”

For a brief moment, Adrian allowed himself to consider the thought that there might be someone in the world whose life was more messed up than his. Jill’s face was brave, but her eyes betrayed her. A month ago, Jill had been on summer vacation at her parents’ home in Michigan, looking forward to moving up to the secondary school at St. Vladimir’s Academy. Then, she’d found out a deeply buried secret—the very one his mother was being punished for suppressing. Jill’s biological father was royalty, part of a rapidly disappearing family line. He had died years ago, and only one other member of
the family now remained: Jill’s half-sister, Lissa Dragomir. Lissa Dragomir—also known as Queen Vasilisa, first of her name, the recently elected ruler of the Moroi.

Out of curiosity, Adrian summoned up some of the magic that lived within him in order to see Jill’s aura, the field of light surrounding all living beings. The magic came sluggishly, a little stunted from last night’s drinking binge, but it still brought the rush and exhilaration it always did. All Moroi wielded some sort of elemental magic, with the basic four being the most common: fire, water, earth, and air. Only a “lucky” few like Adrian possessed the fifth, spirit, which offered greater reach than any other element. It also eventually resulted in insanity.

It turned out he couldn’t get a good fix on Jill’s aura. His control of spirit wasn’t that great today. She sported a range of colors, but they were muted and flickering. Fear, he presumed. Nervousness. Nothing he couldn’t have read from her face. Sonya Karp, another spirit user, could’ve probably deciphered more. She kept trying to teach him, but he had little patience for learning lately—or even for her, at times. Her upbeat attitude and renewed love of life didn’t mesh well with his dark moods. He dropped the magic, and Jill’s aura faded from his sight.

“Maybe you could go too,” she suddenly said. Eagerness lit her features again, though it was tempered with caution. She was worried about overstepping her bounds. “Then you’d kind of get a birthday party.”

Adrian chuckled and dropped the cigarette butt to the ground, grinding it with the toe of his shoe. “Doesn’t sound like a party. Sounds like a family meeting.”

“But other people’ll be there!” exclaimed Jill. “And Lissa won’t mind.”

No, Lissa probably wouldn’t, but Jill’s other words sent alarms ringing in his head. “What other people?”

Once again, Jill stopped herself from finishing a dangerous word, but it was too late. He heard the name in his head and in his heart, where it pierced him like a dagger. Rose. Images of dark eyes flashed through his mind, piercing eyes and a mane of equally dark hair. A body crackling with tension, beautiful in both its shape and the danger it presented. Adrian fumbled for another cigarette, looking down so that Jill wouldn’t see his shaking intake of breath or the grief and anger his eyes would undoubtedly show.

Rose.

She would be wherever Lissa was. And wherever Rose was, he would be there too. Rose and Dmitri Belikov were hardly ever apart at Court. Adrian had gone out of his way to avoid them since Lissa’s coronation and had only run into them twice. The first time, they’d been on guardian duty, accompanying Lissa to a Council meeting. Rose and Dmitri moved almost as one entity, like a matched pair of wolves or lions, both wary and deadly as they studied their surroundings, taking no detail or person for granted.

The second time, Adrian had seen them off-duty. They hadn’t noticed him. They’d been too wrapped up in each other, sitting outside on a sunny day. She’d leaned against Dmitri, looking content in a way Adrian had never seen—certainly not while he’d dated her. She’d said something that made Dmitri laugh, bringing a smile to the other man’s hard features, a smile that Adrian hadn’t thought was possible. Adrian still didn’t know which sighting had bothered him most, the formal or the casual one.

He wanted to tell Jill that he could come up with a list of a hundred other things he’d rather do than sit through a dinner at which Rose and Dmitri were present. “Being in a coma” and “gouging myself in the eye” were near the list’s top. A dinner like that was no way to spend his birthday. It was no way to spend any day. The earlier notion to find random female company tonight seemed like a better and better idea. But first, the blood. Then, the drink. Good God, did he need the drink.

The words were on his lips, the polite refusal of Jill’s dinner offer. He could see from her face
that she was expecting it too. But then, in an odd moment of clarity, he realized something she didn’t.

We’re going to discuss my future, she had said. No. He knew, without knowing how he knew, that they were going to tell her her future. There had been much speculation about what would happen to Jill, who hadn’t even been a princess for a month yet, and whose existence was all that kept Lissa on her throne.

Someone has finally decided, he realized. The group had decided. Or maybe just some of them. Adrian wasn’t sure of the logistics, but he could almost perfectly picture the scene tonight. Lissa would deliver the news in that practiced, regal way of hers, while Jill’s mother and stepfather—who had undoubtedly been won over by now, or else they wouldn’t be meeting—nodded mutely along. And Rose … Rose would be there to ease the tension as best she could, smiling and joking, telling Jill that whatever they had planned was going to be great and wonderful.

Jill couldn’t fight a group like that. Adrian couldn’t even fight a group like that, but for reasons he didn’t entirely understand, he decided he wouldn’t let Jill walk into it alone. Maybe he was still drunk and didn’t realize it. “What time is dinner?” he asked.

Jill was as stunned to hear his words as he was to speak them. Stuttering, she gave him the time and location, and he promised to be there. She left him then, her face radiant, and he wondered what he’d just gotten himself into. With a snort, he walked off, deciding it didn’t matter. What was one more foolish decision in a life full of them? He’d go to dinner. He’d help Jill by being more miserable than she was.

But first—the blood. Then the drink. And probably another drink.