

MIDNIGHT
CUSTOMER

VAMPIRE
SOUL

BOOK
ONE

MAC FLYNN

MIDNIGHT CUSTOMER

VAMPIRE SOUL, BOOK ONE

MAC FLYNN

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Fate is kind and cruel, and sometimes I wonder if it doesn't have a sick sense of humor, too.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not the usual kind to go wearing black and brooding. Life wasn't great, but it wasn't too bad. I was still on the good side of thirty, but my job as waitress at the local diner wasn't exactly a future with bright prospects. It was a dingy place off one of the main state highways. A small, cracked-pavement parking lot stood in front of the long, low, rectangular building. There was the usual long counter with its row of hard, plush red, round seats, worn through by the countless heavy tushes of truckers long past. The floor tiles were cracked, the tables along the windows were etched with the names of men and sweethearts alike, and the whole place stank of grease, the house's special ingredient.

To make matters worse I was the head, and only, waitress for the midnight shift. That was the shift that catered to all the truckers who craved our famous four-apple pie at four in the morning. The only other person who didn't smell like diesel was the owner and cook, a cantankerous old man named Ralph who cooked up food that tasted like his name and swore like the old hand he was. He wasn't much of a conversationalist, but the noise from the kitchen drowned out the quiet at the front.

It was on one of those long shifts that I had my fateful adventure. The night was dark, the weather was drizzly, and my long brown hair was frazzled beyond

the abilities of a comb to tame. I ran a little late trying to tame the mane and got to the diner a half hour after my shift started. There was a half dozen trucks outside when I pulled my own beat-up pickup into the parking lot. The hour was half-past five and the day-waitress, Candy, was tapping her foot and serving patrons at the same time. She saw me rush through the doors and nearly dropped her full tray of burgers and fries on my head. The only reason she didn't was because Ralph would've docked her pay for it, labor laws or no labor laws.

"Where have you been?" she hissed.

"My truck had to swim part of the way here," I replied. That was almost true. The drizzle was aspiring to be a regular downpour, and that promised flooding along the local roads and bridges.

"Well, get to work serving these guys so I can go home," she replied.

"Yes, ma'am," I agreed.

I got to work serving the burly but high-tipper clientele, and my coworker hurried out like the place was on fire. The men were a gabby bunch, and I heard the full reports of the local counties.

"That County 12 road is getting worse. I swear my truck almost got swallowed by some of those potholes," one of the men grumbled.

"What do you expect with everybody fighting over money? They're all too cheap to spend it on something useful," another told him.

I noticed one of the regulars munching slowly on his sandwich at his usual booth. His name was Charlie, and you couldn't find a kinder, gentler giant. He stood six feet six inches tall and had the biggest smile that side of the Mississippi. Right then, however, he had a contemplative expression on his face and only half-listened to the conversation of his fellow truckers. I walked over and refilled his cup of coffee.

"You're awful quiet tonight," I commented.

He shrugged and kept munching. "Guess I don't feel like talking," he replied.

I raised an eyebrow. This wasn't like him at all. He was one of the gabbiest people I knew. I sat down opposite him and stared him in the eye. "All right, Charlie, 'fess up. What's happened?" I asked him.

"It's probably those sightings that's got him scared," one of the other patrons,

a rough man by the name of Ned, suggested. He was my least favorite regular patron because of his harassing attitude toward me and the other truckers. They tolerated him only because he had some good stories.

“Sightings?” I repeated.

“Just some gossip the old women are spreading around. They say there’s a shadow wandering around the farmhouses and scratching at the windows,” Ned explained. Supernatural tales always piqued the interest of the truckers, and this was no exception.

“What’d the thing look like?” another trucker asked him.

Ned smirked, sucked in his ample gut, and basked in the attention. He could only hold the landmass for a few seconds before it spilled back over the waist of his pants. “Well, I heard it’s the shadow of a monster. It sneaks across the walls of the house knocking and scratching at the doors and windows.”

“Has anyone let it in?” the same man wondered.

Ned rubbed his chin and his eyes flitted about the small audience. “I heard there was a family who did in Clark County, and they were found the next day dead.”

I snorted. “How could anyone know they let it in if they were all dead?” I pointed out.

“Well-I-uh-that’s because-um,” Ned stuttered.

“Uh-huh, that’s because no family in Clark County or any other county’s been hit with this shadow thing. I doubt it’s even real,” I argued as I stood. “Now does anyone want anything else? There’s a few slices of pie left,” I offered.

There were a few calls from the truckers, but Charlie still sat there sullen and silent. He dawdled until long after the others had left. Then he strode over to the cash register on the counter, but rather than paying and leaving he sat down on the closest stool.

“Do you really think it’s not real?” he wondered.

I leaned over the counter and looked him over. His face was pale and there were dark bags under his eyes. “Have you slept in the last week?” I returned.

Charlie ran a hand through his uncombed hair and shook his head. “No, not since that night,” he replied.

“That night? Charlie, what happened?” I asked him.

He sighed. “I was over in Clark County four days ago. There’s another diner over there that lets us park overnight, so I was stopping after my twelve-hour shift,” he explained. “Well, there I was in the berth above the cab when I heard something at the driver’s door. It sounded like scratching, like Ned was saying. Well, I thought it was nothing until it moved around to the passenger door. After a minute it stopped and I was almost back to sleep when I heard this polite knock.” He shuddered. “I don’t know why, but that was scarier than the scratching. You know, it’s like whatever was out there figured out scratching wouldn’t work, so it was trying something else. Well, I climbed down and peeked my head into the cab. Sure enough there was somebody standing there at my driver’s door. It was a youngish looking fellow and he had on some dark clothes, but that’s all I could tell, it was so dark outside. The man said to me ‘I’d like to talk to you, sir, but could you let me in first?’ He spoke like it was nothing, like we were old friends. I told him to go away, I needed some sleep. The man took a step closer so his face was just an inch away from the window, and I got a good look at his eyes. They were shining like the devil’s red beacons.” Charlie choked up and clutched his forehead in one hand.

I set a hand on his shoulder. “Listen, Charlie, if this is bothering you-”

He dropped his hand and shook his head. “No, I need to tell this. If anybody’d believe me I knew it’d be my old friend Misty,” he argued. He took a deep breath and continued. “After seeing that I scrambled back up into the berth and-well, I hid under my blankets cowering and blubbering like a baby. The guy down there kept a-knocking and asking me to let him in. He never got mad, just tapped and asked politely if he could talk to me. I didn’t get a wink of sleep that night with that guy standing there all the time until just before sunrise. Then the tapping stopped and after an hour I climbed down and looked out. Nobody was there, but there was his knuckle-prints clear as day where he rapped all nice and polite.” Charlie slumped over the counter and shook his head. “I don’t know if I’m nuts or going nuts, but I swear to my dying day that that fellow was there tapping all night wanting in.”

“Did you tell anybody about this? Maybe the police?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “No, it didn’t seem much like a problem for them. You know, just a guy tapping at my window. There isn’t anything illegal about that, just creepy,” he pointed out.

“And you haven’t slept since?” I guessed.

“Not a wink. Every time I shut my eyes up there in my berth I think I hear that scratching sound. Makes a fellow doubt his sanity,” he commented.

I would have doubted his story were it not for two things. One, this was Charlie and Charlie didn’t lie. The second was how awful he looked sitting there like a ghost of his former self. He really needed that sleep, and that gave me an idea. “You know what? How about you head back to my place when my shift is over? The place isn’t much, but there’s a couch and no truck windows for anybody to scratch at,” I told him.

From his eyes I could see he wanted to say yes. “I-I don’t know, Misty, I don’t want the guys getting the wrong impression about us, and what about your boss? What’ll he say?”

I grinned. “Who’s going to tell him?”

A few hours later found me in my car after work with the headlights of a semi truck in my rear view mirror. It was Charlie, and he was coming to my apartment to get a good night's sleep. We drove through the dark town at four in the morning and there wasn't a sign of anyone. My eyes flitted over the shadows nestled between buildings, behind trees, and under bushes. Much as I didn't believe in what the other guys had said about a phantom, I did believe Charlie's story about the strange man.

Nothing stirred, but I was glad to arrive at a parking lot a block from my apartment building. There wasn't any room for Charlie to park his truck and rig at my building, so I would take him the rest of the way. I parked in one spot and he took another only twenty yards off. He shut off the lights and scurried out of the truck as though the devil was chasing him. Maybe that's what he thought, but either way he slid into the passenger seat and breathed a sigh of relief.

"You must think I'm crazy for being this scared," he commented.

"Nope. I'm not exactly crazy about the dark myself. Had a bad experience in the dark with a mannequin," I told him.

We pulled out and drove the few blocks to my apartment building. It was one of those brick structures with metal window frames and soiled doors that hadn't been replaced since before I was born. I led Charlie up the flight of narrow metal stairs to the second floor of four. My apartment lay on that floor, and soon I was switching on the lights and tossing my keys in the basket on a small table beside

the door. The rest of the apartment was sparse with a couch, coffee table, chair, and a small table with two broken chairs I optimistically called a dining table.

“Make yourself at home on the couch,” I invited him, gesturing to the couch. Charlie nervously took a seat on the furniture, but didn’t say anything. I rummaged through a small closet near the kitchen at the rear. When I found what I needed I turned, glanced at him and snorted. “You can take off your coat, or aren’t you staying?” I teased.

His eyes flitted about the room and he sat precariously on the front of the couch. “I’m not sure about this, Misty. It’s not right-” I dropped an armful of blankets on his head.

“You’re staying here because I’m not driving you back to your truck. Now get comfortable because you’re going to get that nice night of sleep,” I told him.

Charlie dug himself out from beneath the pile and smiled at me. “You’re a stubborn woman, Misty. You ever thought about making some unlucky man your wife?” he mused.

“Nope, but if I ever wanted to curse a man that’s how I’d do it,” I assured him. “Now why don’t you spread out those-” Charlie whipped his head to his left. There was a small window across the room, and his large, quivering eyes zoomed in on the glass.

When he spoke his voice trembled with fear. “You hear that?” he whispered.

I paused and listened, then shook my head. “Not a thing. Maybe it was a branch against the window. We are two floors up,” I reminded him.

“Y-yeah, I guess you’re right,” he replied. He didn’t sound convinced, and made his bed with one eye always on the window.

Charlie settled beneath the blankets and I strode into my room. I shut the door behind myself and proceeded to undress. My mind went over Charlie’s story again and again, but I couldn’t understand what the fellow would want so bad to stand at a window all-

What was that? I froze and listened. I thought I heard a scratching sound at a window-*my window*. I turned around and looked through the open curtains. There, fourteen feet off the ground, floated a pale man. He stared straight at me with burning-red eyes. I did what any sensible woman would do and screamed

my pretty little head off. My cries brought Charlie who burst into the room with a lamp in each of his hands. The face at the window floated backward and seemed to sink into the darkness beyond the light provided by my overhead bedroom fixture.

My legs turned to jello and I collapsed to the floor. Charlie rushed up to me, dropped his shaded weapons on the floor and clutched my shoulders. "Misty? Misty, you all right?" he asked me.

I winced. "I would be if you'd stop screaming in my ears," I told him.

He managed a shaky smile. "Same old Misty," he murmured.

I shook my head. "Not the same old Misty. The same old Misty wouldn't believe what you saw was something dangerous, but this Misty believes what you saw was terrifying and out to get us," I countered.

Charlie glanced at the window. The thing was still gone. He furrowed his brow. "I don't think it can get inside, not unless you invite it," he theorized. "Maybe that's why it kept asking me if it could get into my truck, and why it didn't just come in through the windows."

My mouth gaped and my eyes widened. "Charlie?"

"Yeah?"

"What you just described is a vampire."

"It is?"

"Yeah. A blood-sucking fiend of the night needs to be invited inside before it can attack someone," I told him.

The color drained from his face and his hands on my shoulder shook. "Mother of God," he whispered.

"If what we're up against is a vampire then we might need her help," I agreed. I shrugged off his hands and stood. "For now how about we make sure all these windows are closed, locked, and covered with curtains? We don't need his red eyes peeking in at me undressing, or you sleeping." We checked all the windows in the apartment and closed the curtains. Charlie also flicked on every light he could get a hold of. "What are you doing?" I asked him after he opened the microwave and left it.

"Vampires don't like light, right? If we leave all these lights on maybe he

won't even come near the apartment," he pointed out.

I shut the microwave door. "Vampires don't like sunlight. A microwave isn't going to do anything other than warm him up a pot pie," I argued.

Charlie's hands clawed at one another and his eyes flitted over to the windows and the door. "I gotta do something. I just can't sit here all night knowing he might be out there," he insisted.

I sighed, walked up, and grasped his shoulders. "What you need to do is lay down on that couch and get some sleep. I'll keep the watch tonight. I'm used to staying up late, anyway. It's an occupational necessity," I told him.

"I can't let you do that," he argued.

"You will and you have no choice." I turned him around and pushed him toward the couch where I plopped him down. "Now lay down and get some sleep. I'll shut off most of these lights, but keep a few on so you can find your way to the bathroom."

Charlie reluctantly covered himself with the blankets. "You sure this is okay? The vampire isn't going to slip in beneath the door as a mist or anything?" he wondered.

I snorted and shrugged. "How should I know? I'm not a vampire hunter, but I'll bet my mother's famous pot roast recipe that he can't come in without an invite. We'll just forget to give him an R.S.V.P. for tonight's sleepover and keep our blood to ourselves."

He smiled and shook his head. "You have the funniest sense of humor, Misty. I don't know how you can crack a joke with a vampire out there."

"It's a defense mechanism. It's either cracking jokes or panicking. I prefer the jokes because it calms people down enough so they can sleep, which is what you should be doing," I ordered him.

Charlie set his head down on a couch pillow and closed his eyes. "Yes, ma'am," he replied. His weary voice soon slipped into the regular, monotonous sounds of snoring. The big boy really was exhausted.

I sat in the living room for an hour before I couldn't take the orchestra that emanated from Charlie's nose. After a thorough check of the windows I crept into my bedroom with a dining table chair in my hands. I wasn't planning on

sleeping. Instead I would watch my bedroom window for any signs of our uninvited guest. I plopped the chair five feet from the window and plopped my tush on the seat.

I didn't have to wait long before I noticed something float toward the window. The floating fang-boy was back, and he'd brought something with him. I jumped to my feet and opened my mouth to call for Charlie, but then I saw what he held.

The bloody vampire had a bunch of flash cards in his hand and he held them out for me to read. There went the theory that vampires were telepathic. The writing was big and there was only a single word on each of the faces, but the flashcards were small. I grabbed the back of my chair and, keeping that between me and the window, crept over to my window to read them.

"Please. Let. Me. In," I read the words aloud as he changed the cards. I snorted. "Hell no. The blood bank is closed for the night," I told him. He pulled out a pen and scribbled on the opposite side of the flashcards, then presented them to me again. "I. Only. Wish. To. Talk. Believe me, we have nothing in common," I assured him. He was undeterred, as I noticed by his smile, and he worked his pen magic on a new set of flashcards which he procured from his coat. More reading. I felt like I was back in kindergarten. "I. Mean. You. No. Harm. But. I. Will. Leave. That would be best," I agreed.

The vampire dropped his cards on the ground and floated backwards. I hurried over to the window to see where he flew, but he disappeared into the shadows of the night. The only thing that remained of his visit were the flashcards on the yard around the apartment building. Litterbug. Didn't his vampire master teach him not to leave trash on the ground?

I sat down on my bed with the chair at my side. "Only want to talk," I repeated. I scoffed. "Yeah, right."

A small voice in the back of my mind couldn't help but wonder if that's really all he wanted.

I remained awake until dawn, but nothing else happened. As soon as the sun rose I snuck outside and gathered the flashcards. No sense confusing the apartment manager with these things, and my sanity wanted evidence that it had really happened. Charlie woke up at around eight looking a lot better. We ate a late breakfast and I related what happened after he fell asleep. I even showed him the flashcards.

He flipped through them and shook his head. "I'm really sorry I got you into this mess, Misty," he apologized.

I shrugged. "No harm done, and I can say I met a vampire. Well, just as long as I'm not saying it to a shrink," I replied.

"But you could have been killed, or worse," he objected.

"I could have, but I've got all my blood intact and so do you, so what are you going to do now?" I asked him.

Charlie tossed the cards onto the table. "I'll keep away from the area and hope he follows me. Maybe he'll get bored and go to another state," he told me.

"Just don't lose too much sleep over it," I teased.

He smiled. "If I do I know where I can go for a nice, comfortable couch," he pointed out.

"Yeah, but if you stay around long enough I'm going to start charging you rent," I returned.

"I'll risk it," he chuckled.

Charlie left soon after breakfast, and I prepared myself for some well-earned sleep. As I lay my head upon my pillow I couldn't help but realize my hours were much like those of a vampire. Maybe we did have a few things in common.

I AWOKE JUST after sunset and rose from my coffin-er, bed for my shift at the diner. All was quiet on the window front as I dressed, ate some dinner and took the long drive to the lonely business. I was surprised to see there weren't any trucks out front, but my question was answered by Candy.

"The bridges are washed out up ahead. It was that dang storm last night that did it," she told me as she put on her coat. "Business has been slow all day because of it, and there's been nothing since the sun went down."

"So does that mean I can go home?" I asked her.

"Not a chance," came the voice of Ralph from the kitchen. He poked his balding head out the double swinging doors that led to the kitchen. "Yer staying here until yer shift is over."

"Yes, sir," I sighed, and got to scrubbing the counters clean of dust particles.

It was a long, slow night. At around midnight Ralph's snores marched through the swinging doors and nearly drowned out my thoughts. I was almost asleep myself behind the cash register when the bell above the door chimed the entrance of a customer. My hand slid out from my chin and I face-planted into the counter. I whipped my head up and smiled at the customer, hoping my nose didn't dribble blood.

Thank god it didn't because standing in front of me was the vampire. My eyes bulged out my head and I opened my mouth to scream, but he caught me with his eyes. Those beautiful blue eyes were like crystals that glowed in the dark. None of the blood-red stuff this night. He seated himself on one of the stools in front of me and glanced behind me at the drink machines.

"How's the coffee?" he asked me.

The normal question snapped me out of my funk, but I couldn't manage the scream that vibrated in my throat aching to be heard. If I couldn't fight him off with my girlish power to break glass then I'd fight him with my wits, if only I

could keep them about me.

“It’s not bad, but the only thing left is the bottom of the pot and at that point it takes on a life of its own,” I warned him.

He smiled. His teeth were just a little too long. “Then I’ll take a cup. I could use a little life in me,” he returned. The color drained from my face. “Something wrong? You seem nervous,” he teased.

“You just remind me of someone I met last night, that’s all,” I told him.

“What was his name?” he asked me.

“I didn’t catch his name. He wasn’t really welcomed, so he left,” I explained.

“The man must have had a good reason to leave behind such a beautiful woman,” he commented.

“Maybe it was the man I was with,” I replied.

“Boyfriend?” he wondered.

I turned away to fetch the coffee, but kept an eye on him over my shoulder. “No, I was just babysitting him. Something scared him a few nights ago and his night light wasn’t up to the job,” I replied.

“Really? The same man that ran away from you was scared by a man who was scared by another man?” he teased.

“I’m not sure it was a man I saw, or he saw,” I mused. I turned toward him and froze. The man looked at me with an intense gaze. His eyes beckoned to me and I felt myself falling into them.

He smiled and the spell was broken. I gasped and stumbled back against the counter behind me. The man chuckled. “I frighten you, don’t I?” he asked me.

My pride as a truck-stop waitress bristled at the mocking note in his tone. “No, and do you know why?”

The man leaned over the counter and smiled at me. He was handsome, and under other circumstances I would have fallen like a fan girl for his boyish good looks. Unfortunately, he had unusually long teeth and that made him a member of the Undead, an elite club I had no intention of joining.

“No, why?” he asked me.

“Because of this.” I threw the coffee mug with its searing drink in his face and raced for the door to the kitchen. You would have thought from his scream

that the secret ingredient in our coffee was holy water and not lard. That, or maybe it was the searing heat from cooking all day in the pot.

I flew through the twin hanging doors and woke up Ralph from his beauty sleep. It was a pity, the bedraggled old man needed about a decade more to improve his wrinkled face and thin white hair. He jumped from his chair and whipped his head to and fro. “Wha? Huh?” he cried out.

“Vampire!” I yelled and ducked behind him.

“A what?” he yelped.

“Vampire!” I repeated. I grasped his shoulders and peeked out from behind his thin, short frame. No creature of the night flew through the twin doors and attacked us.

Ralph glared at me and shrugged off my clinging hands. “What in the world are ya yellin’ about, woman?” he growled.

“A vampire was out there! He ordered coffee and-”

Ralph snorted. “Vampires don’t drink coffee, and what are ya doing givin’ him that stuff? Didn’t Candy tell ya I spilled some garlic powder into it earlier and it weren’t fit for an animal to drink?” he asked me.

“Well, he ordered some and then I caught him off guard by throwing a mug of coffee in his face. He hissed and screamed like it was-well, full of garlic powder,” I explained.

Ralph glared at me. “Ya threw coffee in another customer’s face because he got sweet on ya, didn’t ya?” he growled.

I scowled back at him. “There was a vampire in there. He had dark eyes and sharp teeth and everything,” I insisted.

“Ah don’t care what excuses. Ya just ran in here to get out of apologizin’. Now ya just get in there and say yer sorry, and give the man a free cup of coffee,” Ralph ordered me.

“But-”

“No buts, now get out there.” He grabbed my arms and pushed me gently but firmly to the twin doors. “Now git! Go on!”

I swung around and balled my hands into fists at my sides. “Fine, but if I become a vampire than you’re going to be my first victim, and when I’m

through with you then I'll stake you myself," I warned him.

He cracked a bony finger at the doors. "Just git out there," he told me.

I spun around and marched to my fate. All I found for my brave words were an empty stool, a broken coffee mug, and the sticky drink all over the floor and counter. No vampire, and no tip. I admit I didn't deserve the tip, and I was glad to not have him there for me to ask for it. The doors behind me swung open and Ralph leaned against the doorway. "Yer vampire skimp out on his bill?" he teased.

"Yeah, but I'm not complaining," I replied.

Ralph slipped back into his grease-covered sanctuary. I was left alone to clean up the coffee and glance furtively over my shoulder every two seconds. My waitress-senses told me something was amiss in my diner domain, but I couldn't pin it down to any single problem. Maybe it was the dusty bunnies beneath the tables, or the crumbs encrusted in the seats. Or maybe it was the envelope tucked between the cash register and the salt-and-pepper shakers. I picked it up and saw my name on the back written in old-fashioned handwriting.

My curiosity told me there was nothing to lose from reading a letter, even if it was from a vampire. I opened the envelope and found not a letter, but a small slip of paper. On the paper was an address. I vaguely recognized it as a road outside of town that led to the middle of nowhere. There were a few farmhouses and an old barn here and there.

I pocketed the address and was going to toss aside the envelop, but something heavy slid along the bottom. I tipped the envelope over and a small metal key dropped into my hand. It was old and rusted like one of those keys you'd find in haunted houses. A skeleton key. I gulped for dramatic effect.

"Ah don't hear any cleaning out there," Ralph growled from the back.

I rolled my eyes and put the key in my pocket beside the paper. "That's because I'm done," I bit back.

"Then git to cleaning the rest of the place. We'll close up early tonight," he shouted.

I sighed and got to scrubbing the place so the grease shined. All the while I thought about the paper and key that jiggled in my pocket. There was a chance, a

big chance, that this was a trap set by the handsome undead. That, or he was too cheap to leave a tip and thought wasting my time driving along a dusty dirt road would be hilarious. Either way I couldn't be sure of anything unless I took a look out there.

I got off work and drove home for a nap until the sun rose. If this was a trap I wasn't going to be caught in the middle of the night. When the sun was good and strong I got up and prepared for the journey. I made a cross out of a pair of silver forks I inherited from my grandmother, and stuffed a small spice container of garlic powder into my pocket. That seemed to work last night.

I took my truck and bumped my way along the country roads. Fields of yellow wheat surrounded me on all sides, and far off in the distance was a small patch of woods filled with sinewy aspen and thick willows. I knew a stream gurgled through there and fed the plants and wild beasts that ate up the wheat fields.

I passed a few scattered farmhouses, but there was no sign of anyone, living or undead. Google Maps and I miscalculated this drive, and after a half dozen wrong turns the morning was now mid-afternoon. I finally reached the road at two. The way was long, dusty, and little used, more like two empty trails among the weeds than a road. I slowed the car and crawled the four tires through the dust with my eyes looking out for a sign of a building or loose coffin.

The trail led to the clump of trees, but at that point my 'road' narrowed to nothing more than a path full of dead leaves and sticks. I stopped the car and stepped out. There wasn't any sign of a house or barn, just the sinewy trees and the brush that grew against their trunks.

I pulled out the slip with the address and read the road name again. This was

the right road, but there was nothing here. I looked up from the paper and peered into the shadows of the woods. “Hello?” I shouted.

I jumped a foot in the air when a flock of quail flew from the brush. They rose into the air and sat themselves on the branches of the trees. Their calls informed me of their indignation at being disturbed. I stuck my tongue at them and focused on the trail again. There were two options in front of me. One was to follow the rules of every horror movie and go into those woods, and the other was to turn around and drive off as if I was being chased by all those things in those horror movies.

I decided I was a little smarter than the average horror-movie victim and if trouble came my way I wouldn’t imitate the Blair Witch project. If there was going to be any running it was going to be directly for my car at a speed slightly below breaking the sound barrier. I crunched my way into the woods while keeping one eye on my car in case it decided to leave without me. The canopy of the trees cast their shadows on the ground, and more than once I considered turning tail and running.

I had just about made my mind up to do just that when, at the one hundred foot mark, I spotted something through the trees and around a corner in the path. It looked to be an abandoned farmhouse, one of those that was perfect for all occasions like frat parties and vampire hangouts. I reluctantly carried on and my car disappeared from view. After another twenty yards I found myself standing in front of the farmhouse. The building was two stories tall with a covered porch on the front that sagged worse than an old woman. Shutters hung precariously from the windows like loose false eyelashes. The roof sagged, the paint peeled, and I consulted my mental index to remember when was my last tetanus shot.

I couldn’t remember, but I forded on anyway. The steps leading up to the porch creaked like they were in desperate need of oil, and they bent beneath my weight. I scurried across the boards and to the closed door. Of all the rotten boards and termite condos on the house this was in the best condition. It even had a working knob that I grasped and tried to turn. Locked, but I noticed there was a keyhole in the knob. I pulled out the key from the envelope and inserted said key into the mechanism.

One quick turn and I heard the door unlock. The working key confirmed I was in the right place, and I pushed it open. The door swung inward and revealed a long hallway that led to the back of the house. In front of the hallway were the stairs leading to the second floor, and on either side were rooms. The windows were boarded up so only slits of light shone on the dusty, leaf-strewn floors.

Before I trapped myself inside I took the key and pocketed it. No sense having the door slam behind me locking me inside. As much as I could make an exit through the broken windows, I had a feeling I wouldn't be walking away from that many cuts. More likely I'd be on the porch or ground whimpering and bleeding all over the place waiting for the vampire to wake up and finish the job I'd started.

I stepped into the hall and glanced to the left and right. Dining room and living room. The dining room was occupied by spiderwebs, and the living room was now the un-living room. That is, if I was going to believe the coffin-shaped box on the floor. I clutched at my heart worrying that the beating organ would leave the premises without me. Fortunately it stayed put, but my curiosity told my legs to take a closer look. I crept up on the wooden box with its dark shine. Old cherry, by the look of it. Very elegant. Must have cost a fortune. I stopped a foot from the expensive bed box and looked for a way to open the coffin. It looked as simple as opening the lid.

My eyes caught on the coffee table that sat beyond the coffin. On its dusty top lay a simple wooden box six inches square. I felt as though I was mesmerized by the small chest, so mesmerized that I bypassed the coffin and stepped up to the coffee table. Etched into the wood of the box were depictions of wolves, woods, and people with sharp, pointy teeth flitting through the shadows of the trees. I leaned down and gave a tap on the lid, then jumped back. Nothing happened. The thing wouldn't be trapping this booby.

I picked up the box and turned it over in my hands. Nice craftsmanship, creepy carvings, of apparently ancient make. Yep, it belonged to the vampire. I looked at the front and saw there was a small lock that kept the lid closed. That recalled the tiny key I'd used to get inside the house. I tried that, but nope.

Wouldn't even fit into that small a hole.

The creepy shadows and my watch reminded me it was almost time for a certain bloodsucking fiend to wake up and haunt the night. I didn't want to be here to give him a 'good evening,' so I hurried toward the doorway with the box tucked under my arm. No sense leaving the place empty-handed. I reached the archway to the room, paused, and glanced back to look at the coffin. It was just too tempting not to try to take a peek.

I put the box softly on floor, tiptoed over to coffin, and tried to open lid. It wouldn't budge. Must have been locked from the inside.

"Great, a vampire smart enough to lock himself inside his coffin," I murmured. My heart stopped beating when I heard a faint chuckle come from the coffin.

Time to leave.

I snatched up the box on my panicked way through and flew out the front door onto the leaf-strewn, non-existent yard. The last of the sunlight led me back to the car, and I tore out of there and back to civilization with my prize in the passenger seat.

I returned to my apartment after sunset and was glad it was my night off. My adrenaline was gone and all I wanted to do was collapse face-first into the couch. Unfortunately, there were chores to attend to. The first was my setting the strange box on my coffee table, and the second was sniffing the air. The garbage smelled like somebody had died in it, and I was fed up with death, undead or not. I grabbed the bag, dragged it to the door, and swung open the entrance.

The bag dropped from my hand when I beheld the vampire standing just shy of the threshold of my apartment.

He smiled and bowed his head to me. "Good evening,"

"It was." I slammed door and stumbled over the garbage bag and away from the entrance. He'd come to take his revenge on my stealing his wooden box. There came a knocking on my chamber-er, apartment door. "Nobody's home," I called out.

"Please open the door. I'm not asking to be let in," he replied through the door.

That was the final straw. He'd been a thorn in my side for these past couple of days culminating in this insult on my person. I wasn't going to take this bullshit. I scowled, pushed aside the garbage back with my foot, and flung open the door. He smiled at me and I tried to melt his face off with my glare.

"How dumb do you think I am? You think if you bother me long enough I'm going to-"

A door at the end of the hall opened and a rough-looking man stuck his head out. "Shut it up!" my neighbor yelled at us.

I pointed at the vampire. "Shut it up? I'm trying to get a vampire out of our apartment building!" I countered.

"I don't care if he's Elvis, just shut it up," the man growled, and slammed the door.

I whipped my head back to my uninvited guest and glared at him. "Do you mind leaving? I'm not in the mood to make a blood donation," I hissed.

"I only wish to speak with you," he persisted.

"You really think I'm just going to say 'please do come in' and-" The vampire side-stepped around me and into my apartment. My mouth dropped open and I pointed at the hall. "I was not being serious, so get out!"

He smiled and shook his head. "An invitation is an invitation, and to revoke it is very bad manners." He pulled me from the doorway and pushed the door closed. The latch made an ominous clicking sound when it shut.

I squirmed out of his grasp and rushed to the other side of the couch. When I looked at the door I found him staring at me. I waved my hand at the door. "Get out! Shoo!"

"I will leave when I have made my request," he replied. He strode over and seated himself on the couch.

"This isn't a bat hotel and I'm not interested in your request, so get!" I insisted.

He nodded at the container on my coffee table. "Don't you wish to know what's in that box?" he countered.

"What I wish to know is how to get you out!" I snapped.

"It's very important to me. I thought perhaps your trucker friend Charlie

would hold it, but he was much more frightened of me than I expected,” he commented. He glanced over me with those dark eyes and I stepped back while clutching my neck with both hands. “You, however, don’t seem very frightened of me at all. Why is that?”

“Because I can scream a lot louder than Charlie,” I quipped.

He chuckled. “I think it’s because you know I won’t hurt you,” he argued.

“And I think you thinking that I’m thinking you’re not going to hurt me is wishful thinking, but let’s stay on the topic of you leaving,” I replied.

“I’d rather stay on the topic of you.” Great, the only man in the world who wanted to talk about me wasn’t really a man. The vampire patted the cushion beside him. “Won’t you sit down?” he invited me.

“Won’t you please leave?” I practically begged him.

He sighed, but stood. “If that is what you truly wish,” he replied.

“That’s what I’ve been saying for the last five minutes,” I reminded him.

“Then I will go.” He strode over to the door and grasped the knob, but paused and glanced over his shoulder. There was a dark look in his eyes that reminded me I was a virile young woman. “I think I must warn you that others of my kind may come looking for that box. Keep it safe for me, will you?” He opened the door, stepped out and paused to glance over his shoulder. “Oh, and don’t open it. You don’t want to find out what’s inside,” he warned me. Then he shut the door behind himself.

It took my mind a few seconds to process what he said to me. The box. Others of his kind. Looking for it. Oh shit. I grabbed the box like it was a hot potato and raced to the entrance. I flung open the door and looked into the hall to toss the accursed box at him.

The damn vampire was gone. Just when I wanted him around he left. Just like a man. I looked down at the box in my hands. There was still the idea of tossing it out, but now I had the feeling whatever was inside this thing was pretty important. If I tossed it out and the ‘others of his kind’ were to come looking for it and be told I decided to turn it into fertilizer at the town dump they’d be a little mad. They might even have me go look for it at said dump.

That decided it. I’d keep the box and if someone did come asking for it they

could have it. I stepped back inside and closed the door. That's when Plan V came to mind. Tomorrow afternoon I'd return this box to its owner, key and all. I didn't want it, didn't need it, and didn't care what the vampire said about my keeping it safe. He could keep his own box safe and leave me out of this messy vampire business.

I stood over the creepy box on the coffee table and was just pondering if I needed to wear a scarf to bed when there came a knock on the door. I turned and frowned at said door hoping my Evil Eye would scare whoever it was away. There came another knock. I needed to work on that Evil Eye.

I walked over and peeked through the peephole. Nobody was there. I yelped and jumped back when there came another knock on the door. I hadn't seen a hand to make the noise. There was only one way to find out if I was hearing things. I reached out a shaking hand and grasped the knob. There was another knock and I yanked open the door.

Standing in the doorway was a beautiful little girl. She looked about ten with curly blond hair and pretty blue eyes. The girl was dressed in a frilly pink dress that reached to the ground, complete with pink bow in her hair. She gave me a smile so sweet I winced from the cavities popping up in my mouth. Even her voice was soft and as sticky as chewed bubblegum.

"Hello. I was looking for my daddy. Have you seen him?" she asked me. She wasn't any of the tenants I'd ever seen, and most of them didn't have class enough to wear clothes, much less ones as nice as hers.

"Um, I'm not really sure. What's your daddy look like?" I wondered.

"He's a dark man with dark hair and dark clothes," she replied. She peeked around me into my apartment and her eyes lit up. She pointed a stiff finger at something behind me. "That's my daddy's box!"

I turned to see what she was referring and never doubted for a second it was the creepy box. Sure enough her finger pointed at the box on the coffee table. I turned back to her and raised an eyebrow. “So your daddy is the creepy guy in black?” I asked her.

She grinned and gave a nod. “Yep!”

I looked her up and down. Pinky here was either a bad liar or took after her mother because I couldn’t see any resemblance between the owner of the box and her. “So what’s your daddy’s name?” I wondered.

“It’s Roland, and he’s a little funny. Sometimes he thinks he’s a vampire, and he leaves Mommy and me for a few days and hides in a coffin. Mommy says there’s something wrong with him,” she replied. Her red lips slipped into a morose frown and she tapped on her temple to show where the problem lay. The next moment she was bright and chipper again. “Can I have his box so I can take it to him? Daddy thinks it’s something special, and he might come home if he thinks I have it,” she pleaded.

Here was my chance to get rid of the box. If this Roland guy wanted it back he could fight his family over it. “Yeah, sure,” I agreed. I walked over to the box, grasped it in my hands, and turned to find the little girl still stood just outside the doorway. “Is something wrong?” I asked her.

She shook her curly head. “Nope.”

My waitress senses told me something was amiss. The vampire’s warning echoed through my head. I smiled at the girl and held the box in front of me so she could easily grab it. “Here it is,” I told her.

The little girl glanced nervously at my apartment. “I-I don’t think I should,” she argued.

“Shouldn’t, or can’t?” I mused.

The girl blinked at me and tilted her head to one side. Her adorable factor rose by one cuteness point which was equal to a whole room full of teddy bears. “Can’t?” she repeated.

Okay, I wasn’t buying this Shirley Temple act any longer. Something wasn’t right about a girl dressed head-to-toe in pink and wandering around at this hour in my neighborhood. I plopped the box back on the counter, crossed my arms

over my chest and glared at her.

“All right, cut the act. What the hell are you and what do you want?” I questioned her.

She dropped the act like a rookie catcher drops balls. Her pleasant face twisted into a terrible scowl and her eyes changed from blue to black. The curls in her hair grew limp and her voice changed from sickly sweet to buxom bar maid.

“What I am is none of your concern, but I’m doing you a favor by taking that box off your hands,” she told me.

“Uh-huh, and how do I know you won’t take what you want and come back later for a drink on me?” I countered.

She shrugged and leaned against the exterior part of the door frame. “You don’t, but do you really want to keep that box around? It’s dangerous,” she warned me.

“Not as dangerous as a vampire,” I argued.

The girl chuckled, and the sound sent a shiver down my spine. Her laugh had a tinge of tainted innocence, like a puppy who would maul off your hand. “Why don’t you just hand it over? We both know you don’t want to keep it, and you don’t even know why Roland left it with you,” she pointed out.

“Because he didn’t want to leave it with you,” I quipped.

“Come on, you know you want to give it to me,” she cooed. Her voice sounded like the sweet song of a nightingale twittering on its branch. A faint cloud slipped into my head and I recognized the the effects of mesmerism, like what Roland had done to me to keep me from screaming the first night we met at my window. I found myself slipping deeper into obedience as her words drolled on. “Just imagine handing it to me and letting all that worry slip off your shoulders. You won’t have to-”

Good thing I still had that bottle of garlic powder in my pocket. I whipped it out, popped off the lid, and intended to throw it at the cute little vampire, but her eyes narrowed and caught mine in their dark depths. I couldn’t throw it. My arm just wouldn’t lob that sucker at the bloodsucker. My quick-thinking and strange mind came up with another possible solution. If I couldn’t lob the container I

could try a different route. I jammed my nose into the container.

The smell of garlic invaded my nose and I flew into a sneezing fit that broke the spell of the vampire. It probably also helped that I wasn't really a fan of garlic myself. I fell onto the couch feeling like my nose was going to explode, but I was free from the vampire.

The little dark princess of the night wasn't thrilled to have her spell broken. She slammed her foot against the floor and I swear I heard a crunch of wood. "Let me in!" she shrieked.

My sneezing slowed and I ducked behind the couch so she couldn't catch my eyes. I lobbed the garlic container over the back of the couch toward the door and heard her scream in terror. There wasn't a peep of anything after that. I waited ten seconds before I peeked over the back of the couch. The doorway was empty of everything except my garlic container on the ground and door frame. Not a bad throw for doing it blind. I slid around the couch to the entrance and slammed the door.

I leaned my back against it and slid down to the floor. "What have you gotten yourself into now?" I muttered to myself.

My eyes fell on the box that sat on the counter. I scowled at it, climbed to my feet and marched over to the troublesome three-dimensional square. This lump of wood and metal was causing me a hell of a headache, and I didn't even know what was inside. A mischievous grin slipped onto my lips. An aspirin would handle the headache, and a screwdriver would satisfy my curiosity.

An hour later I decided I needed more aspirin and a better screwdriver. The lock on the box was sealed like a mummy's tomb minus the whole curse business. At least I hoped there wasn't a curse on the box.

I stopped my picking and leaned back to get a look at my handiwork. There wasn't so much as a scratch on the lock, but my screwdriver looked like it'd been trying to peck away at solid steel. The poor thing's nose was more out of joint than Ralph on a bad night, not that there were any good nights with him, or even from him.

I looked at my watch and sighed. It was forty-five minutes after I should have given up. I stood and gave the box a good kick to let off some steam. Turns out the box had some steam to let out, too. White mist blew out from beneath the lid and spilled onto the floor.

"Whoa!" I yelped and hopped back.

My imitation of the Easter Bunny saved my tail, or in this case my toes. The mist blew over my floor and the rug on top of that, and ate through both of them like a pack of starved piranhas with a taste for cloth and vinyl. The crispy edges of the mist's reach boiled like acid and smelled like a dead animal that was ripe enough for a vulture. The mist slipped back into the box, but my floor didn't stop bubbling like some chemistry experiment gone wrong.

I left the box where it sat. I liked behind able to count to ten without using

my toes. I sat back on the couch and glared at the box.

“Your owner better pay for the damages or the manager’s going to have my hide,” I scolded the box. It sat there like an innocent box, but I knew better.

After ten minutes the bubbles stopped bubbling. I leaned over the box and inspected the damage. I couldn’t wave to my neighbors below me, but a few more inches and they would’ve had a funny skylight. I left the box and went to bed. Maybe I’d wake up and find this was all some sick joke by the trucker guys. Maybe Charlie had rigged the whole thing with a friend of his.

“And maybe I’d wake up to a million dollars in cash on my doorstep. . .” I muttered.

Yeah, even I didn’t believe the guys could pull off a prank this complicated. I’d seen their style of tricks, and most of it consisted of dunking a guy’s head in a toilet. Something did smell fishy here, but it didn’t come from a restroom. Most of it came from that small girl with her gagging adorableness. A voice in my head told me I hadn’t seen the last of her.

I got into bed and rolled over, but sleep didn’t come. Having a possessed box in the living room with a penchant for pyrotechnics meant counting sheep wasn’t going to work, not that night. I lay awake half the night thinking about that damn box and its damned owner. He was more trouble than he was worth, and considering he was a vampire he was worth a lot to the scientific community. Whatever the reason I needed to protect that box, short of saving the world, I wasn’t going for it.

I rolled over and sighed. “Come sunup, the box goes back to his coffin. . .” I murmured.

That calming thought finally got me to sleep. I woke up later that day and sat up in bed. A thick clump of hair hung in front of my face, and I brushed it aside and glanced at the clock on my nightstand. My mouth dropped open. Four o’clock. I had an hour to get that box back to its owner before the owner woke up and refused service. Worse yet, I had to get to work in that same hour.

I jumped out of bed and opened my closet to grab one of my diner outfits. The closet was empty, but there was a stack of dirty clothes in the laundry basket. In all the excitement of vampires, scary little girls and terrifying boxes

I'd forgotten to do the laundry.

"First thing when I get back," I promised my dirty clothes as I grabbed one of their own from the basket.

The apron was grease-stained and the skirt was wrinkled, but I'd iron some of it out with my butt. That was all anyone ever looked at, anyway. I slipped into the outfit and raced through the bedroom door only to confront my old enemy, the box. It sat where I'd left it on the floor surrounded by its burn victims, my floor and rug.

That thing had to wait just a few minutes. I lunged for my fridge and pulled out something I'd been saving for soup: garlic. They were pathetic little bulbs barely worthy of the name, but I strung them on some dental floss from the bathroom and in a moment they were my dearest friends. No vampire would dare attack me with a necklace made of garlic.

I slipped that over my neck and hid it beneath my white blouse. Then I tiptoed over to the box and leaned towards the thing. It didn't move. I gave it a tap with my finger and jumped back. There was no sign of the acid fog.

There was also not much time. I snatched the box and raced to the door. I swung it open and ran into someone standing just outside. We tumbled into the hall and crashed into the door opposite mine. I ended up with my face buried in a suit jacket and one of the pointy corners of the box stuck into my gut.

I pushed off from my visitor and smiled. "I'm so sorry, I didn't-" Wow. This guy was a looker.

I'm not talking about some cute guy you see on the street. This guy belonged in one of those model magazines, the ones with weight-loss ads and promises to make any teenage girl into a sexy cougar kitten in ten easy steps. He had short, perfect blond hair swept back to show off a perfectly sculptured forehead. His perfect blue suit was wrinkle-free after our collision, and his black shoes were so clean I could see my reflection. He wore thick-framed black glasses in front of his sparkling green eyes and had a smile that would've made Candy's knees shake so bad you could've heard the water splash. The only thing that messed up his perfect face was his hand. His nostrils flared like a bull and he slipped his hand over his face. I couldn't blame him, not when I walked around smelling

like an Italian pizza.

“Where’s the fire?” he teased.

Any other time and I might have thought about giving him the time of day, but time and I were not on friendly terms right then. I needed to get somewhere before the wooden bomb in my hands decided it wanted to blow its foggy top.

“Sorry about that,” I told him as slid around him.

He grabbed my arm and stopped my escape. “Wait. You’re Miss Misty-”

“I’d love to chat, but I’ve got to get to work,” I persisted. I tried to pull myself out of his hand, but it was like trying to get out of a required health class. Teacher wasn’t going to take ‘no’ for an answer.

“I really must speak with you,” the man insisted. He pulled out a card from inside his suit and held it out to me. “My name is Owen Alston.”

I took the card and read the name. It was the one he gave, but he forgot the part about him being a lawyer. “What do you want from me?” I asked him.

“One of my clients would very much like to speak with you,” he explained.

“I’d love to, but I really need to go.” I twisted my arm from his grasp and faced him as I walked backwards down the hall. “Maybe some other time.”

“My client demands it be tonight,” Alston persisted.

I shook my head. “I really can’t.”

“He will be very displeased if I don’t bring you to him,” the lawyer told me.

“Well, tell him I died or something,” I suggested.

A strange smile slipped onto his cute lips. “I’m afraid he would know I am lying.”

“Just think of it as practice, but I really have to go,” I insisted.

I spun around and ran down the hallway to the stairs. The guy didn’t follow me, but my thoughts followed him as I rushed to my car parked on the street. I wondered if I’d just passed up an opportunity to get into an unknown rich relative’s will, or maybe I inherited a haunted mansion that would end up killing me with upkeep costs. Whatever he wanted could wait until tomorrow. I had his card, and with internet and a few minutes a name was as good as a phone number.

I stomped on the gas and drove like the devil was after me. Stop signs were

more of a guideline as I sped through town and out into the country. I hit the country road half an hour before sunset, and hit the end of the road fifteen minutes before my shift began. I snatched the box from the passenger seat and dashed through the spooky woods to the house. The sun must have known I was in a hurry because I swear it dropped faster the closer I got to that place. I rushed up the stairs and across the porch to the door.

That's when I remembered I didn't have the key. It was in my day-off clothes, and they were in the hamper at my house. Behind me the setting sun disappeared behind the horizon. I groaned and knocked my forehead against the door.

"Can this day get any worse?" I wondered aloud.

I heard a girly giggle behind me and turned around to find the creepy little girl standing at the bottom of the porch steps. She wore the same dress, but now it was completely black.

"Thank you for leading me to him and the box," she told me as she walked up the steps. "Now I can have both of them."

I slid against the peeling front wall of the house as she walked up the steps. “If you’re here to sell Girl Scout cookies, I’m on a diet,” I told her.

She giggled. I hated that sound. It made the ends of my hair stand on end. “You’re funny. I’m going to be very sad when I have to kill you.”

“Then don’t,” I quipped.

She shook her head and her curls bounced. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. You know too much.”

“I don’t know how the hell you found me,” I commented.

“You didn’t check the trunk of your car,” she cooed.

“You know, it’s not a good idea to hitch a ride with a stranger,” I told her.

She reached out for me. “We can talk later after I get that box.”

I gripped the box against myself and stepped past one of the front windows. “Over my dead body.”

“All right.” The girl snarled, and I saw her teeth were long and pointy. Also very clean. She was a dentist’s dream child, but my worst nightmare. The girl jumped at me, but she got within a foot before her eyes went all wide and she stumbled back. She flung up one arm and hissed at me. “Garlic!”

I was out of the frying pan and into the fire when a shadow flew through the window beside me and the glass burst into thousands of tiny shards. They rained down on me, and I raised my arm and turned away to keep my face from turning into hamburger patty. The little girl screamed, and I peeked over my arm. The

Village-of-the-Damned reject hung three feet off the ground and had her neck draped in the grip of Roland, or whatever his name was. He held her over his face and snarled at her.

“You don’t know what powers you are dealing with,” he warned her.

She sneered at him. “More than you know.” She swung forward and kicked him in the face with the soles of her dainty shoes. He cried out and stumbled back. She dropped to the ground and jumped backwards off the porch. Her little jump dropped her fifteen yards from the porch where she glared at us with her little red eyes. “You can’t protect it forever, and when you slip I’ll be there.”

“We’ll be sure to leave the lights on,” I quipped.

The little girl gave me one last parting farewell glance that promised a lot of pain, and then she turned tail and raced into the woods. That girl had small legs, but she could really sprint. In a few seconds she was gone.

That left me and the vampire. The other vampire. He turned to me and his red eyes told me he wasn’t too pleased.

He stalked towards me with his hands balled into fists at his sides. “What are you doing here? I told you to keep the box safe,” he growled.

You might have gotten the impression by now that I wasn’t very ladylike, but I’ll tell you something that’ll prove you wrong. After all that stupid excitement I fainted. It was a good faint, too. I didn’t even remember falling. One minute the world blacked out, and the next my eyes were fluttering open like a mad butterfly trying to escape a cat.

The world was a fuzzy television until my eyes focused on a dark shape in front of me. The shape formed into a pale face with sharp teeth. My eyes widened and I scooted back, or tried to. My back was already against the peeling front wall of the house. My legs were stretched out in front of me and the box sat in my lap.

The vampire smiled. “I’m glad to see you remember me. You hit your head quite hard on the way down and I was afraid there was some damage.”

“Only the brain damage that convinced me to come here this late,” I quipped. I picked up the box and shoved it at him. His nostrils flared and he leaned away from me, but not out of my reach with the box. “Take this thing back. It’s got

more bad luck than a valley full of mummies.”

He placed his palms on the opposite side of the box and pushed it towards me. “I must insist that you keep it.”

I pushed it back. “I don’t want it.”

“You must take it.”

“No, *you* have to take it.”

“It must be kept with you.”

“I said take it back!”

The box decided to end the argument by venting some steam from beneath its lid. I’d seen this trick before and didn’t want to end up with the nickname of ‘Stumpy,’ so I dropped it and scooted backwards across the porch. The vampire grabbed the bottom of the box and the fog crawled over his hands. I expected screams of pain, or at least an ouch, but he just knelt there holding the damned thing.

“I know the box is terrifying, but it must be kept in safe hands during the day and night,” he insisted.

“My taxes are terrifying. That thing is deadly,” I retorted. As I spoke the fog crawled back into its wooden hole. The vampire’s hands were as pale and ten-digited as before. I frowned and pointed at his hands. “How’d you do that?”

He smiled. “My own soul will not harm me.”

I snorted. “I may work at a diner, but that doesn’t mean I was born yesterday. Vampires don’t have souls.”

He bowed his head. “I submit to your correction, but I am an exception.”

The vampire stood and walked over to me. I scooted back until my hand touched air behind me. I fell backwards over the side of the porch and onto the leaf-covered ground. It was a soft, if squishy, landing, but the pile of leaves was so deep that they covered me over my head. I came up sputtering twigs and leaves. I know I needed my vegetables, but they could have at least been cooked.

The vampire came to the edge of the porch and knelt there. “You would be more comfortable inside,” he teased.

“I’d be more comfortable if you’d leave me alone,” I quipped.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “I can’t do that, not anymore. You’ve

dived too deep into the rabbit hole.”

“And me without my hunting gun. . .” I muttered.

He held out one of his hands to me and caught my eyes. “I promise I won’t harm you.”

I glanced between his pale hand and pale face. “I suppose you haven’t done any biting yet, but if I get so much as a hickey from you you’re going to get a bad sunburn.”

He smiled and bowed his head. “Agreed.”

I took his hand and he lifted me out of the leaf pile and plopped my feet on the porch. He steered clear of my garlic-covered neck and gestured to the front door. “If you would follow me.”

I wasn’t feeling too smart when the vampire led me through the unlocked door and into the house. I hadn’t even tried the knob before I’d knocked my head against the entrance. We stepped into his parlor. His coffin was still on the floor, but the lid was open. The inside was stuffed with red silken padding. It looked pretty comfy, but I didn’t have any future plans of testing it out.

He gestured to the couch on the opposite side of the table from the coffin. “If you would please be seated.” I took a seat and he placed the box on the coffee table between us. “As I’m sure you’ve realized, I am a creature of the night.”

“And annoying,” I added.

He smiled. “I prefer to think of myself as diligent.”

“And I like to think of myself as rich and famous, but that ain’t happening,” I quipped.

“It may if you will help me,” he countered.

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m listening.” He tapped the top of the box. I jumped against the back of the couch. “Don’t do that! It’s already claimed two victims at my apartment!”

The vampire tensed. “It has killed?”

I slid back onto my cushion and shrugged. “Well, not exactly people, but I was fond of that rug.”

He relaxed. “I see. I’m glad to hear it hasn’t harmed anyone.”

I looked him up and down. “Not to sound really racist or anything-”

“Vampires are not a race. We are a species of human outside the realm of mortality,” he corrected me.

“Well, not to sound mortalist or anything, but why should a vampire care if somebody didn’t die? Don’t you kill us to survive?” I pointed out.

He shook his head. “Not I, but there are those of my kind who do feed until their victim is dead.”

“So you’re not going to use me as a twenty-four hour blood bank?” I questioned him.

He smiled. “Only if you wish it.”

“Which I don’t,” I told him.

“Then it will not be so. As for this-” he placed his hand on the box, “-my soul knows there is no danger from its master, so no fog will appear unless I try to force my way into the box.”

“So you have the key or something?” I wondered.

His smile slid off his lips and he shook his head. “No. I was only able to capture my Soul Box and make my escape. The key remains with-well, with the one who held my soul.”

I held up a hand. “Wait a minute. Who’d you steal your soul from? Some guy on a street corner?”

“He can be found in those places,” the vampire agreed.

I glared at him and stood. “Listen, I don’t do business with anybody who isn’t being completely honest with me, and you’re not ‘fessing up. That usually means it’s more trouble than it’s worth, so I’m out.” I went for the door, but the vampire slipped in front of me like a floating phantom.

He held his arms out on either side of him and looked me in the eyes. “Please. I’m in desperate need of your help.”

I folded my arms across my chest and leaned on one leg. “And I’m in need of answers. Either you ‘fess up or you can go to the devil for all I care.”

A strange half crooked smile slipped onto his lips. “I’m afraid that wouldn’t be a good idea. You see, that’s who I stole my soul from.”

I tilted my head to one side and scrunched up my face. “You’re joking, right?”

He shook his head. “I don’t joke about matters of the heart and soul.”

I pointed at him and then the box. “So you stole your own soul from the devil?”

“You’ve got it.”

“No, I don’t have it,” I argued as I put my hands on my hips. “A vampire steals his soul from the devil, locks it up in a box, and tries to pawn it off on a couple of humans?”

“I didn’t lock it in the box. The devil did that,” the vampire told me.

“Fine, you didn’t lock it up, but why the hell did you give it to me?” I persisted.

“Because I need someone to ensure its safety during the day,” he revealed.

“Don’t you have a spare coffin you could hide it in?” I suggested.

“If it’s left unattended the devil would be able to take it back, and then I would be in a great deal of trouble,” the vampire explained.

“Then I’d say you’ve got yourself in a real pickle, and I don’t see my way of joining this hamburger stand without getting cooked,” I retorted.

“Must I get on my hands and knees to beg for your help?” he wondered.

I looked him over. His face told me he was desperate and cute, but maybe not cute enough. I sighed and folded my arms. “That would be a start, but where

do I fit in this exactly? I'm supposed to do what with the box during the day? Babysit it?"

"In a way," he admitted. He passed me and picked up the box. I noticed a slight glow come from beneath the lid. It illuminated his pale face and I noticed his features softened. "It's difficult to explain the loss of one's soul to one who still possesses theirs, but being without a soul is like being without a part of one's self. There's a hole there that can't be filled with simple pleasures, and a sense of loss that can't be forgotten. It would be as though you lived your life, but you could never enjoy its sweetness." A small smile slipped onto his lips and he looked up at me. "I'm afraid I'm terrible at explaining it, but that is what it feels like to be without a soul. A loss without end."

I nodded at the box. "And you stole your soul back so you could end it?"

He nodded and set the box back on the table. "Yes, but I find myself only halfway there. I have my soul, but not the key."

"Where's that?" I asked him.

"The devil possesses it, and he seeks to regain my soul," he told me.

"He must be the worst repo man in the world," I quipped.

"In any of the three worlds. Heaven, hell, and on earth," the vampire agreed. He turned to me and looked me in the eyes. "But that's why I need your help. I need someone brave and strong-willed to keep my soul safe until I figure out a way to free it from its imprisonment."

"And then what'll happen?" I asked him.

He raised his arms and looked down at his pale hands. "Then I will be free of this accursed life. I can't finally, truly rest." He curled his hands into fists and shook his head. "But not yet. I've got to find that key, and while I do that I need my soul protected." He looked to me and smiled. "This must all sound insane to you."

"We passed insane when your soul turned my rug into melted cheese," I quipped.

"I will pay for the repairs, and for anything else you might desire while you protect my soul," he assured me.

I held up my hand. "Wait a sec. I haven't agreed to do anything."

He smiled. “But you won’t refuse me. I’ve lived a long time and have studied human behavior thoroughly. You’ll protect my box.”

I snorted. “Your studies must be rusty when you picked Charlie to protect your box. He’s as meek as a kitten.”

“But he has a big heart,” the vampire pointed out. He ran his hand over the box and sighed. “I thought perhaps he would rise to the challenge, but I was wrong.”

It was like looking at a whimpering puppy. There he was stroking his box with that sad look in his eyes and that sad story. I’d done a lot of human study in my time at the diner, and it was telling me the guy was telling me the truth. Damn it.

I sighed and held out my arms. “Give me the box.”

His face brightened. “You’re sure?” he asked me.

“No, but give it to me anyway.”

He picked up the box and walked over to me. “You do realize this will mean putting yourself in mortal danger?”

I dropped my arms and scowled at him. “I do now. How ‘mortal danger’ are we talking about? More of those creepy girls in dresses?”

The vampire stopped in front of me and frowned. “There is only one of those.”

“Good. Two of them and Stephen King would have to sue them for copyright infringement,” I commented.

“But there are others who will seek out my soul,” he warned me.

“Why? What’s so special about your soul?” I asked him.

“A loose soul without even a spiritual body is a rare thing,” he explained. “Many would try to harness its power for their own uses.”

I pointed at the box. “But it’s in a box.”

“There still may be ways to use it, and that’s why it must be protected so constantly,” he told me.

“And I’m supposed to protect it from all these other people how?” I wondered.

“With your stubbornness and kindness,” he replied.

“Uh-huh. I don’t think that would’ve saved me from the child of the corn,” I pointed out.

He gave me that cute half-smile of his. “Perhaps it would have if I wouldn’t have interfered.”

“More likely you would’ve opened the door to a really mad drained corpse,” I countered.

“Humans have more powers than they give themselves credit,” he argued. He held the box out to me. “Will you take responsibility for my soul?”

“To have and to hold until death do us part. . .” I mumbled as I reached out and took the box from him.

He smiled and set a hand on my shoulder. “You won’t regret doing this.”

I snorted. “Too late.” My eyes widened and I looked down at my watch. “Shit! I’m late for work!” I stuffed the box into his arms and raced down the lane to my car.

The vampire caught up to me and ran with ease at my side while I wheezed like a chain-smoker. “Do you want my help?” he offered.

“Anything. . .you. . .can. . .give,” I replied. He tossed the box in my path. I ran into it and juggled the box for a moment before I had a firm grip against my breasts. The whole episode made me skid to a stop far short of my car. “This isn’t. . .what I had. . .in mind!”

“Toss your necklace to the side,” the vampire instructed me.

I glared at him. “Sorry, Fangy, but I’m not falling for that one. The garlic stays on.”

“Then you will be much later than you need to be,” he replied. I frowned. He held out his hand. “Trust me.”

I looked down at the box in my hands. What the hell? I never wanted to live forever, anyway. “All right, but I’m counting my blood cells when I get to work,” I warned him as I pulled off the necklace with one hand.

The minute I had it off me was the minute he jumped forward and scooped me into his arms. I was so surprised I dropped the necklace and wrapped my arm around his neck.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked him.

“Hold on tight,” he warned me.

He knelt down and sprang into the air. I didn’t expect the whitest boy in the world to be able to jump, but we flew fifty yards straight up. We floated there for a moment before he leaned forward. We shot through the air at a speed that would’ve been frowned on at the Autobahn. The wind whipped past us and slapped my hair in my face. The tops of the trees sailed past beneath us and I saw a fleeting glimpse of my car at the edge of the woods.

“My stop was back there!” I yelled at him.

“I will take you directly to work,” he explained. “In the meantime, enjoy your first-class flight.”

“There better be a meal in this. . .” I mumbled as I brushed my hair out of my face.

The vampire slowed, I looked ahead of us. My eyes widened as I beheld a view of the valley. There was the glistening river as it reflected the bright moon. Far off to our right little lights shone through the apartments and houses that filled the small streets of my hometown. Cars zoomed across the roads with their headlights reflecting their journey to home after a long day of work. Below us farmhouses dotted the countryside made up of yellow and green patches of earth with the occasional cow pasture dotted with aspiring hamburgers.

“Wow. . .” I breathed.

“Do you like it?” he asked me.

I coughed and looked away. “Not bad.” I chanced a glance up at his face. He looked down at me with that sly grin. I frowned. “What?”

He shook his head and looked forward. “Nothing.”

We made record time and landed behind the diner in the employee parking lot. He set me down on my feet and I glanced at my watch. A drive that would’ve taken me half an hour was flown in five minutes.

“I guess being your box watcher does have its perks,” I commented.

He smiled and bowed his head. “Glad to be of service.”

I looked around at the parking lot. “I think you’re going to have to be of service later. I don’t have my car to get home.”

“I will be here to retrieve you,” he assured me.

“You’d better.” I pushed the box into his hands and straightened my skirt. “Anyway, thanks for the ride.”

“It’s the least I could do considering how much you have helped me,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, well, I’d better get going.” I half-turned from him, but paused and glanced over my shoulder. He still stood there with the box in his hands. “You know, I haven’t caught your name,” I told him.

His smile widened and his long teeth glistened like a toothpaste commercial. “It’s Roland.”

“Roland, huh?” I guess the little girl wasn’t lying about that. “Well, I guess I’ll see you later.”

“We will be seeing much of each other,” he returned. He floated off the ground and flew off into the night.

I didn’t like the sound of that.

A NOTE FROM MAC

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TRouble For Two:

"Where the hell have ya been?" Ralph growled at me.

"Getting here," I snapped back.

Normally I didn't snap back to Ralph, but a lot of things had happened to me in the last twenty-four hours. I'd dealt with two vampires, a box with a sensitive soul inside, and a fear that maybe I was one episode away from being measured for a white jacket and padded cell. Being yelled at by my boss because I was twenty minutes late for my job at the diner didn't exactly sit well with me.

Ralph's squinty eyes narrowed until they were as thin as his legendary cheap pancakes. "Well, ya better learn to get here faster or ya won't have ta get here at all. This is the second time this week ya've been late and Ah won't stand for another time, ya understand?"

My shoulders slumped and I nodded my head. "I get ya."

"Good." He waved at the swinging doors that led from the kitchen to the front. "Now go get Candy out of there. The boys aren't playing nice today and ya can dish it out better than she can."

“Lucky me. . .” I murmured as I swept through the pair of doors.

The front of the diner was full of truckers crowding the counter and tables. They were usually good boys, but one rotten tire would blow out the whole bunch. The usual troublemaker was Ned, and tonight wasn’t an exception. He sat at the counter with a bunch of guys crowded behind him.

I stopped dead in my tracks at the conversation.

“You know there ain’t no vampires,” I heard one of the bunch speak up, a fellow who delivered hay to most of the local farmers.

Ned sneered at him. “That just shows what you know, Brady. That family up in Northton didn’t die of heart attacks, ya know. No, they was drained dry of their blood.”

“How do you know that?” another asked him.

Candy walked up to them and put her hands on her hips. “Boys, if you’re not going to order something could you please leave?”

Ned glared at her. “I’m talking here, so don’t interrupt.”

“And I’m trying to work here, so move out,” Candy snapped back.

“We’ll move out when I’m done telling my tale,” Ned snapped at her.

“And it’s just a bunch of tall tales,” Brady retorted. “Ain’t nobody’s killed by a bunch of vampires.”

Ned smirked and pulled a newspaper out from his coat. He slapped it down on the counter with the front-page headline facing up. “Then what’s this?”

Everyone leaned over the paper, and I walked over for a peek. The top headline had bold black letters that screamed *Vampires On the Loose!* The sub-headline read *Family of Four Found Dead At Dinner Table With Blood Drained From Their Bodies*. There was a picture of a farmhouse in the nearby town of Northton on a road I’d driven on maybe twice in my life.

“What do you say to that?” Ned preened.

“I’d say it’s all a bunch of hogwash,” Brady argued.

Ned scowled at him. “Hogwash when all them folks up there

inspecting the corpses think it's something not natural? I heard from one of the deputies myself that the sheriff's plumb scared out of his mind, and the doc who looked at the folks couldn't find a drop of it anywhere, neither."

"Maybe it was a wild animal," one of the other men suggested.

Ned scoffed and tapped the article. "Then where'd the blood go, huh? Animals don't suck the blood from someone without ripping a big hole in 'em, and these folks were found in their chairs."

"Guys, come on. Order something or leave," Candy insisted. She noticed me out of the corner of her eyes and turned to me with a frown. "About time," she hissed.

I smiled and stepped past her to the counter. "All right, boys. What'll it be?" I asked the crowd.

"Scram," Ned growled.

I looked around at all the frightened faces and tapped on the newspaper. "We've got a hell of a garlic steak for anybody that's interested."

"Me!"

"I'll take it!"

"I'll get one!"

"Sure thing, but you all better find a seat," I ordered them. "No seat, no service."

The men scrambled for a seat or booth, and in a moment Ned's little group was gone. He grabbed the paper and stuffed it into his jacket. "Like a stupid garlic steak's gonna save anybody."

"You'd be surprised. . ." I murmured as I turned to grab a pad and pencil.

"What was that?" Ned asked me.

"You'd better order some for yourself or the boys aren't going to believe your tall tale," I told him.

He glanced over his shoulder and sneered at the others. His voice was so low even I could barely hear it. "They'd better believe it. There's

something fishy going on here and I'm going to find it out."

He slipped off his stool, tossed down some change for the coffee cup in front of him, and sauntered from the diner. The other truckers watched him go and spoke among themselves. Their vocabulary was full of the words 'vampire' and 'blood.' Not words I wanted to hear after the fun I'd had earlier.

Candy came up to me and grasped my arm. "Where the hell have you been?" she hissed.

"I went to see somebody," I told her.

"Well, see them some other time. I'm tired of holding down your shift," she snapped.

I jerked my head towards Ned's empty seat. "They been at that for a while?"

She rolled her eyes. "Just all evening. Arguing about vampires and that family that got killed." She bit her lip and her eyes flitted to the empty stool. "I hate to admit it, but it does sound pretty weird."

"Must be the exhaustion talking," I told her. "You go home. I'll take things from here."

"All right, but don't be late tomorrow," she insisted.

Candy left and I manned the wilderness outpost for a few hours. The truckers had their fill of garlic and steaks, and one-by-one they got into their trucks and went back out on the road. The last one left at about midnight with the jingling bell on the door ringing behind him. I wiped his table clean and plopped myself down in the booth seat that faced away from the door.

"Vampires. . ." I murmured. "Why couldn't it have been magical rabbits or unicorns?"

"Because those don't exist," a voice spoke up behind me.

In one quick motion I stood, spun around, and flung the tablecloth at the voice. The person raised their arm and grabbed the tablecloth before it smacked them in the face. He lowered the arm and I got a good look at him. I had no idea who he was. The guy was about forty with speckled

gray hair and steely brown eyes. He wore a long black overcoat that brushed against the ground. It was buttoned up to his neck and had a high collar that hid his throat. I had to get me one of those.

The man showed off a crooked grin and spoke in a slight Scottish accent. "Is this how you greet all your customers?"

"Sorry about that." I glanced past him at the door. It was closed. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Because Ah didn't want you to," he told me. He tossed the tablecloth at me and I caught it. "Now could Ah get some service, and some information?"

I frowned. "Maybe the first, but the second depends on what you want to know."

He walked past me and slipped into the booth seat opposite where I'd sat. The man clasped his hands together and grinned up at me. "Ah want to know about vampires."

I snorted. "Then you've got the wrong place. Transylvania is a couple thousand miles east of here."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Not that old kind, but the new one. The one that did this." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a newspaper clipping. It had the same story Ned had showed off earlier that evening. He tossed it onto the table and it slid towards me. "Do you know anything about this?"

"Why should I know anything about it?" I returned.

"Because Ah heard you had a run-in with a vampire the other night," he told me. "One of your friends by the name of Charlie told me all about it."

My heart beat to the tune of a tango, and I slid into the seat opposite him. "What'd Charlie tell you exactly?"

He nodded at the paper clipping. "That you both had an encounter at your apartment with the creature that did that."

"How do you know he's the one who did it?" I countered.

The man's smile slipped from his lips and he raised an eyebrow. His

eyes looked me over like he was a Catholic and I'd just professed my love for the devil. "Ah get the feeling you know something about this vampire that you're not willing to tell me."

I held up my hands. "Listen, Mr.-"

"David Ginsleh," he told me.

"Mr. Ginsleh. I don't know if what Charlie and I saw was a vampire, but I'm not going to tell you what I saw and what happened here-" I tapped the newspaper clipping, "-are connected because I don't know. All I know is that if you order the steak we're all out of garlic, and if you want some coffee it'll come as black as tar and twice as thick. Now what will you have?"

He inspected me a couple more moments like he expected some monster to jump out of my chest before he leaned back and shrugged. "Ah will take the apple pie. Charlie told me it was unusually well made."

"I'll get it in a jiffy," I replied. I stood, paused and looked at him over my shoulder. "By the way, how'd you find Charlie?"

The man smiled that crooked smile of his. "We both will keep our secrets."

I shrugged and turned away. "Suit yourself."

I got him a slice of apple pie and got back to my cleaning, but I kept an eye on him. He ate the pie, but didn't relish it. I could tell by the way he kept staring out the window every few bites. He was more interested in the night than the extra-cinnamon filling.

Ginsleh finished his dessert and walked over to the cash register to pay. He opened his wallet and I noticed there was some strange looking money in there. Colorful stuff like monopoly money. He pulled out some cash and handed it to me.

"Keep the change," he offered.

"Thanks," I replied.

He turned, but paused and looked back at me. "A word of warning before Ah go. It isn't wise to be dealing with these creatures. They can't be trusted to keep their words."

“I’ll remember that when I see one,” I returned.

“You’d better,” he answered. He tipped his head at me and walked out. The bell over the door still didn’t ring.

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