

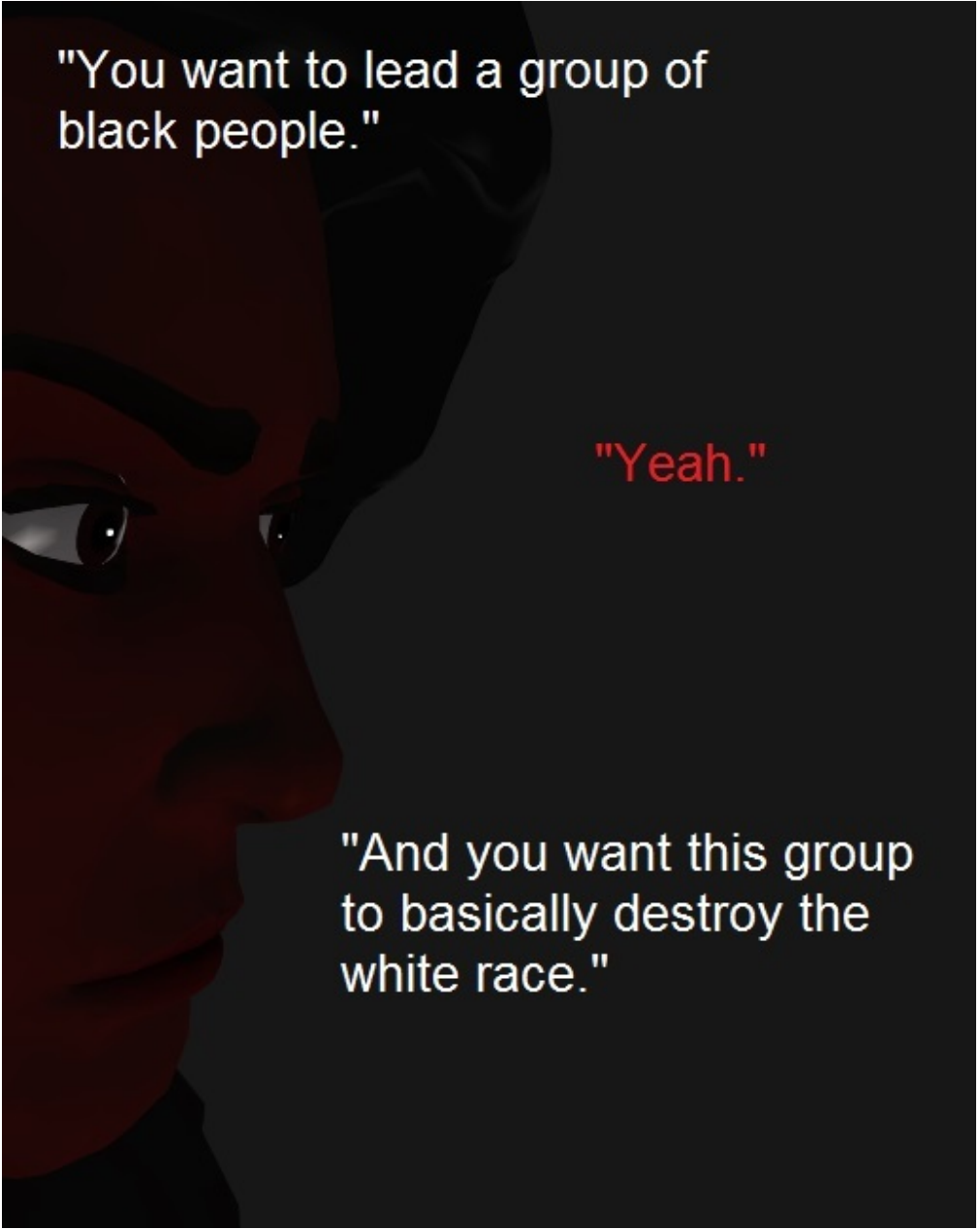
Splattered

Tag Cavello

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Tag Cavello
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Smashwords Edition

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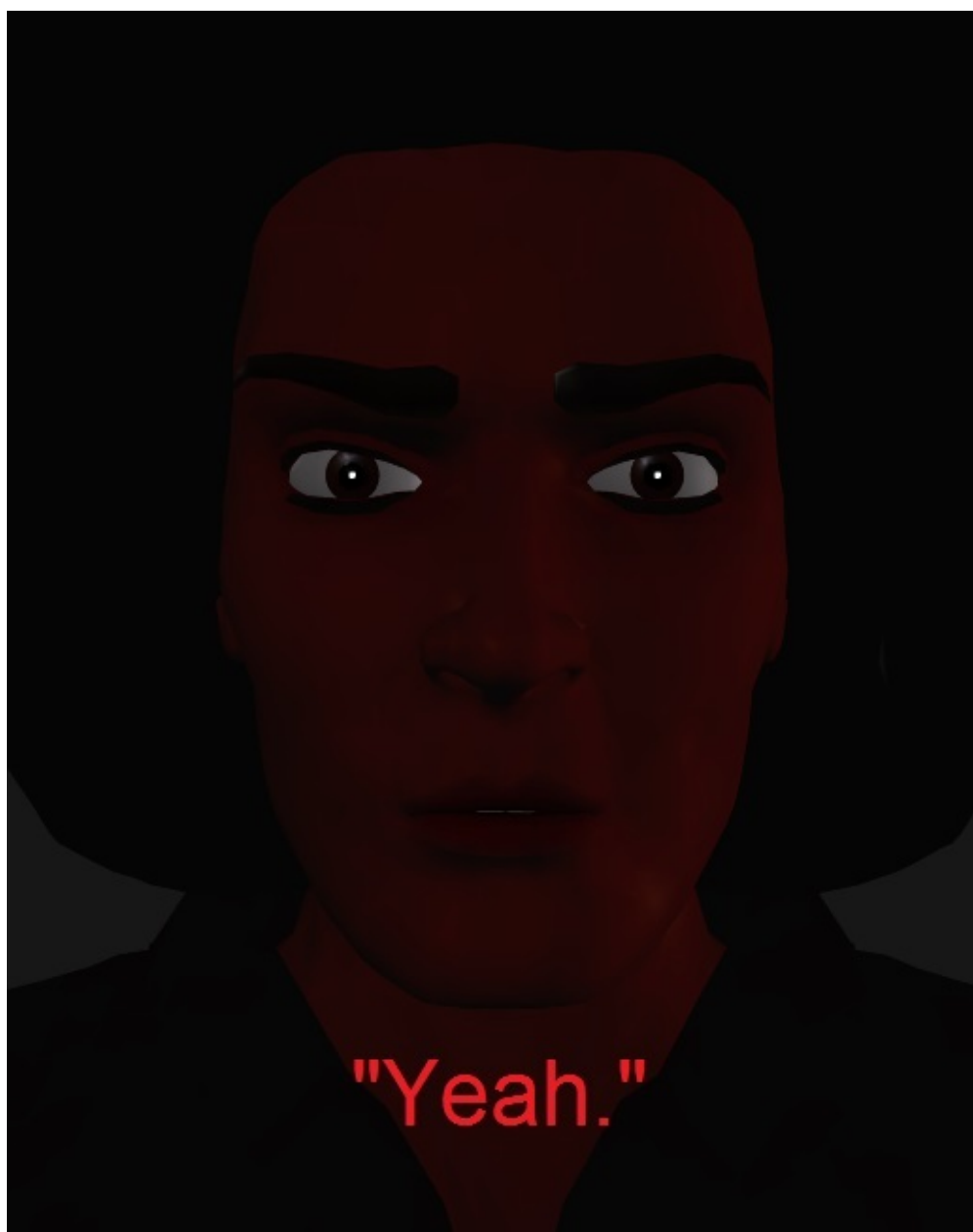
**The 1960s was a
time of turmoil...**



"You want to lead a group of
black people."

"Yeah."

"And you want this group
to basically destroy the
white race."



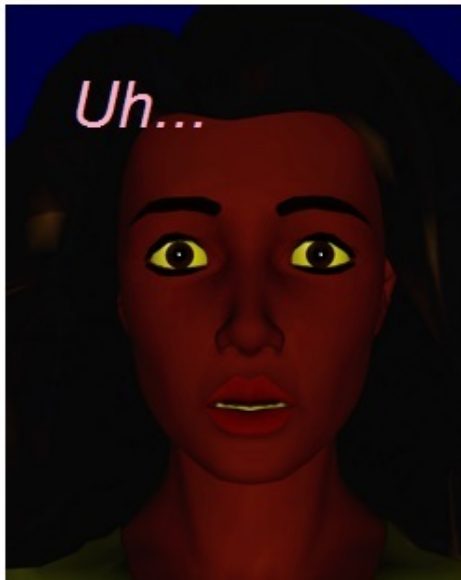
*What's your dream,
baby? Tell me.*



To rid this pathetic
rock we call a planet
of all white men.



Uh...



Okay.



**...a time of
strife.**

A time of fear.

"You're a corporate CEO,
but you're also a member
of what's probably the
largest hate group in our
country?"

"Don't tell anyone.
Please."

"Whatever else you want to
do to me..."





*You can't waste a
lifetime oppressing
black people!*



SOMEBODY has to!

But love, like life,
always finds a way.

Fellow crazy
people!

Thank you for
coming!



*HATE! HATE! HATE!
HATE! HATE! HATE!*

*HATE! HATE! HATE!
HATE! HATE! HATE!*

I'll be happy
when the internet
arrives!

Because man,
this shit will be
so much easier!



*HATE! HATE! HATE!
HATE! HATE! HATE!*

*HATE! HATE! HATE!
HATE! HATE! HATE!*



Hey Tommy! How
many black guys
does it take to
change a flat?

How many?



Two! One to swap the
tire and another to
steal back the hubcap!

Ha-ha-ha!
Oh fuck you!
Fuck you man!

Always.

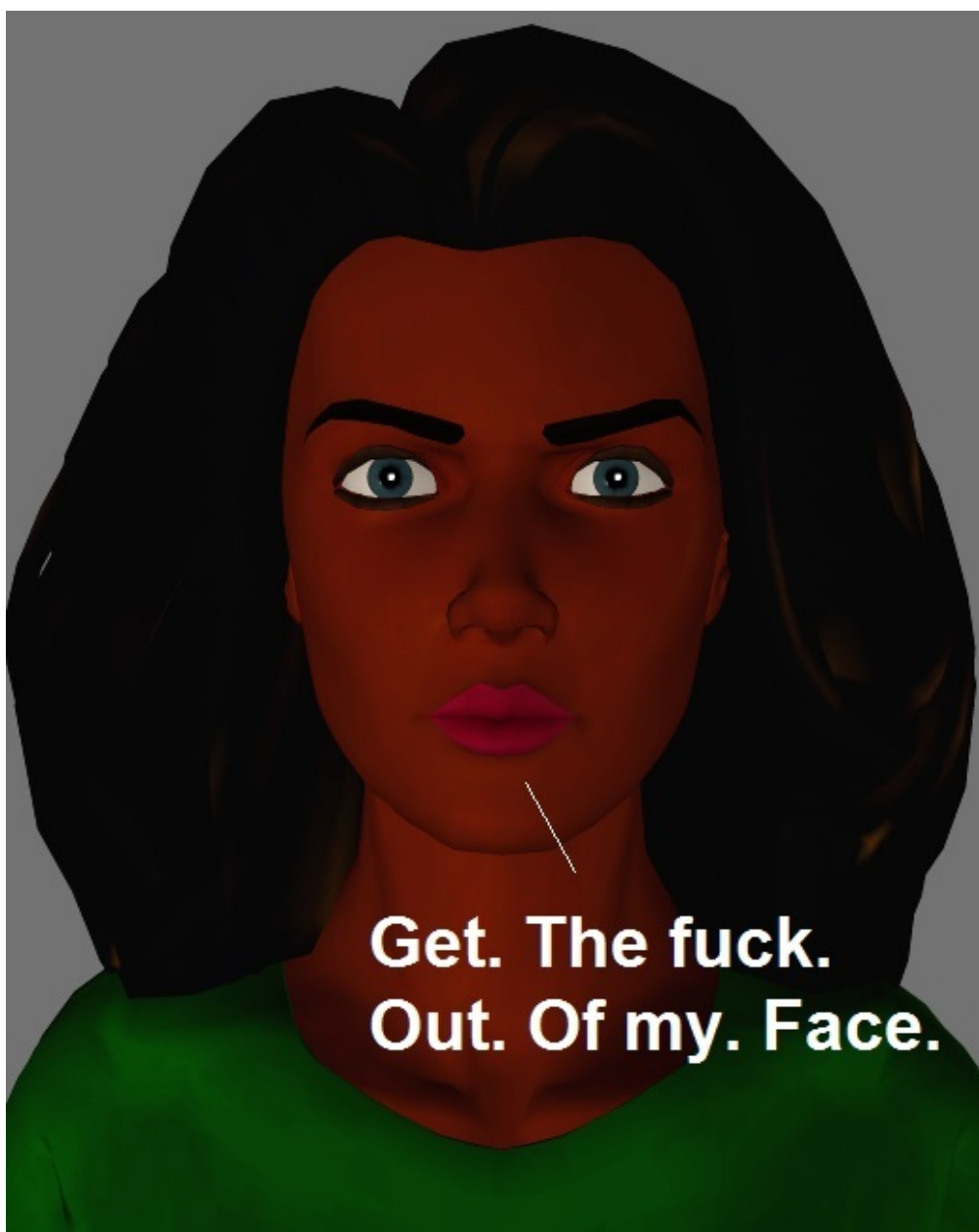






**"I love him. He's
black...and I love
him. Sorry."**

**"I can't believe
this, baby, but I've
fallen in love with
a white man."**



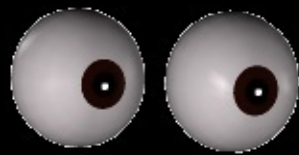
From author
Tag Cavello
comes the most
controversial
ebook ever...

Two men.

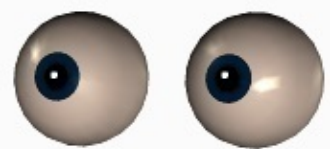
One passion.



ZEBRA



RAIN



Tag

Cavello

Coming

Soon!

AND NOW...
FOR OUR **FEATURE PRESENTATION!**

*“Don’t be sad, baby. You did good.”
Thank you, little shark.. For everything.*

Cavello Productions Presents

Crystal Genesio in...

SPLATTERED

Prologue: Highway Girl

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Afterword

Prologue: Highway Girl

We are born and we die.

That's really all there is. It's all we get from what author Raymond F. Jones once called this island Earth. From the most insignificant insect burrowing beneath the wood of a fallen tree in remotest Alaska, to the president of the United States in Washington, D.C.; from the tiniest of krill in the north Atlantic to the mightiest of Blue whales upon whose palates they are consumed; from the puny, round stones beneath our feet to the great, jagged rocks of the Himalayas; there is always that one commonality, that one thread, that one inexorable road to which everything must adhere.

There is room for more, of course. Much more. The time in between each event is rife with possibilities, but for neatness' sake, we may add only two: We are born, we grow up, we get old, and we die. Which of the four is the most difficult to carry off? Statistics for such a query have perhaps never been pursued. Is it birth, with its pain and blood and tears? Is it growth, with its numerous mistakes and bitter compensations? With age comes frailty, sickness, and for many, the fear of the shadow of death. It's hard to determine the worst of the lot.

Keltie Burke has already been born. She is, at the beginning of this story, ten years old, attending fifth grade at Pleasant Street School in the small town of Norwalk, Ohio. And since she can remember nothing about the day she arrived in this world, it would be well nigh impossible to catalogue (without consulting the mother, who drinks and cannot be trusted to recall events beyond a day old) exactly how much pain and blood and tears were involved. Thus, we shall focus for now on the second stage of her life's journey. A young girl sits in a classroom, waiting for the end of day bell to ring. The collar of her pink shirt is frayed; her jeans are wrinkled. Her eyes, blue, squint at the blackboard, not due to any myopic condition, but in disbelief for the silliness of the words written there. She runs a hand through her short, black hair and releases an audible sigh. The teacher hears. Her cold eyes blink. And from here, on a very bitter wind indeed, the growing up of Keltie Burke takes wing.

Miss Wheeler's eyes blinked once, twice, three times. She was sending a warning. Or perhaps, young Keltie thought as she found an adverb on her quiz paper and circled it, a challenge. *Would you like to share with the class what that little sigh was supposed to mean, Miss Burke?* A challenge, yes. It made much more sense to think of it that way. Whenever one of Miss Wheeler's kids coughed too loudly at a report card, or closed a book with too hard a snap after seeing that day's homework written on the blackboard...or sighed just a tiny bit too deeply during a quiz, the eyes came up. And blinked. And blinked.

The girl ran quickly down the street.

With a suppressed snort, Keltie circled another adverb. How the hell else was a girl supposed to run? Slowly?

Now she could almost feel Miss Wheeler's eyes, blinking away like a couple of camera shutters. Blinking...and daring her to look up.

Keltie looked up. "Can I help you?" she asked the square, stony face hovering three rows in front of her. "Oh, I'm sorry. May I help you?"

All movement in the classroom—including that of Miss Wheeler's eyes—stopped. A gust of

autumn wind found the window, peeked in, and was gone. Miss Wheeler stared at Keltie; Keltie stared back. It was barely over a month into the school year and already she had been made sick by this woman's ridiculous antics. The proper use of *can* and *may*. The *don't even think about getting a drink* rule when leaving with the restroom key. And how she had treated Alyssa McGroom yesterday—how she had spent five minutes embarrassing her in front of the whole class. Enough was enough.

"Perhaps it is you," Miss Wheeler said, "who needs the help."

"Not at all," Keltie told her, "unless you count the assignment written on the board.

Memorize The Highwayman by Alfred Noyes. I've already read the poem and I didn't like it. I don't want to memorize it."

"What didn't you like about the poem, Keltie?"

"It's too long."

"Is that all?"

"No."

Miss Wheeler's eyes had begun to blink again. A sudden urge to leap from her seat and blacken both of them took hold of Keltie. It really was irritating as fuck to watch her do that. Blink, blink, blink, you will speak to me until I say it's okay to stop speaking. Blink, blink, blink, explain yourself, young lady.

"I can't imagine being stupid enough," Keltie went on, "to blow myself away to save the life of a thief who likes my hair."

Some of the other kids laughed. One of them was Alyssa. Another one, God love her, was Penelope Sitko, who'd been friends with Keltie since the first grade and probably hadn't even read Noyes' poem yet.

"Quiet!" Miss Wheeler snapped, rising from her desk. She was only in her late twenties but already her butt was starting to get big. It was because of this, Keltie thought, that she never wore a skirt to school. Pantsuits only, if you please. Oh and vote for Hillary in 2008. "Miss Burke, the word *stupid* is a crude, offensive colloquialism, and I do not permit its usage in my classroom. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good girl. Now approach the front of the class. You will explain to everyone why you did not care for *The Highwayman*. You will be literate. You will be insightful. You will use complete sentences. You will *not* use idioms like *blow myself away*. You will not sneer. You will not give disgusted little sighs."

Keltie rose from her seat as soon as the silly woman stopped to take a breath. Though she was only ten years old, talking in front of groups did not make her nervous. Quite the reverse. She liked the kind of attention that put her in charge. It was such a glorious departure from the more brutal variety she received at home.

"*The Highwayman*, by Alfred Noyes," she began, placing her hands on her hips, "is a tedious piece of work with some clever rhyming, but not so clever characterization. Why would this landlord's daughter wait for her lover at the inn? Why wouldn't she go out riding with him instead? I would."

More titters from the class. Some of the boys wore lopsided grins. But a hiss from the teacher shut everyone right back up.

"The thief promises to bring the girl gold, and then rides off to steal it. But why tell her that? Why not surprise her with the gold instead?"

"The theme of the poem," Miss Wheeler cut in, "has nothing to do with surprising your Valentine with a gift."

"But it would have been safer for them both had the guy kept his mouth shut, right?" Keltie asked the class, without looking at the woman behind her.

"Keltie, don't ignore me!"

"And let me repeat myself for those of you in the back who may not have heard: There's no way in hell I kill myself for somebody else. No way in hell."

"Keltie...Louisa...Burke!" Miss Wheeler thundered.

Twenty-five pairs of eyes goggled from a gallery of gaping mouths. Even Penelope, who understood Keltie better than anyone (including her own parents), looked ready to sign whatever papers were necessary to have her friend committed on the spot.

"Sorry," she said, blinking sheepishly, more like Hugh Grant than Elizabeth Wheeler. "But that bothered me. A lot. So I guess maybe it is a good poem after all."

"Go to the office, Keltie."

At last, Keltie turned around to look at her teacher. The woman's pantsuit looked severe enough to capsize a military cease-fire. What did her boyfriend think of those things? Did she even *have* a boyfriend? She did, Keltie remembered. At the beginning of the school year she had talked about him a little. She had also invited anyone in the class to come to her house for dinner, on any night they wished. "Just knock on my door," she had said, smiling, "it's perfectly all right. I love all my students." Not long after that, they'd found out that Alyssa McGroom had taken her up on the offer. It turned out Miss Wheeler was not only a liar, but a total bitch as well.

"Maybe I'll use my hatred for the poem to memorize it," Keltie told her presently.

"Maybe you won't need to memorize it, young lady. Unless it's for next year, when I have you back in this class to repeat the fifth grade."

"Oh *that* sounds like fun."

"Get out! Now!"

Keltie walked back to her desk. Her chin was up, her gait spirited. She thought she had done pretty well for herself, all things considered. She had spoken her mind without getting frightened. And by the look of the class—awe-struck, admiring—her message had been received.

"Leave your books," Miss Wheeler said as her hand touched a copy of *Epiphanies in English*. "You can pick them up at the end of the day. And keep your eyes off the ceiling. You have nothing to be proud of."

Keltie gave Miss Wheeler a sneer, and then looked up at the ceiling with her arms held wide.

"Stop that!"

"See how easy this is, Alyssa?" Keltie called out, holding her pose. "Don't let her make you feel bad. She isn't a monster who's going to drink your blood."

Keeping her head up, Keltie made her way to the back of the classroom. The fluorescent lights were clean and white. Not a single dead bug hung from the silver fixtures. It was hard not to be impressed by that. But then, this wing of the school was still fairly new. Detroit had once looked pretty, too. With time everything—and everybody—got old and disgusting.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Miss Wheeler demanded to know.

"I'm talking about how you laid into Alyssa for coming over to your house for dinner, after you *invited* her to do it."

"What happened when Miss McGroom came to my house is none of your business, dear."

"Then maybe," Keltie told her, letting the words ooze coldly from her throat, "you shouldn't have shared the experience with the entire class. *Dear.*"

Miss Wheeler stared across the room at Keltie for a long time. Her eyes blinked once, twice, three more times. As before, Keltie faced them down without a struggle.

"You think you're a pretty smart little girl, don't you?" the teacher asked when it became apparent the blinks were not working.

"I'm not bad," Keltie replied.

"You're awesome," someone—it sounded like a boy—said.

Miss Wheeler's head jerked. "*Who was that? Tell me! NOW!*"

By this time Keltie had reached the door. She grabbed the handle, pulled it. Its well-greased stainless steel latch clicked. Beyond was a marble floor with red carpeting. Masonry walls painted white, like a prison's. And of course, more fluorescent lighting. Everything looked so clean and new. So *ordered*. From down the hall she could hear Mr. Rhenborg talking about integers; from somewhere else came the sound of a flushing toilet.

"Get back here!" Miss Wheeler snapped. She had come out from behind her desk and was moving towards Keltie. It was now or never. Stay or run.

Smiling, Keltie raised her middle finger. "*This is for can I,*" she said, "and *this*"—her other middle finger stabbed the air—"is for *may I! Fuck off!*"

There came a screech from Miss Wheeler as Keltie turned and ran. *Catch me if you can, bitch*, she thought. She was pretty sure Miss Wheeler, with her flabby arms and her dumpy butt, would be able to do no such thing. Keltie's legs were a blur. She raced past the drinking fountain (*don't even think about getting a drink!*) to a wall of windows with steel frames painted brown. Beneath these windows were two doors that let on the outside world. Small lungs gasping for air, Keltie yanked one of the doors open—

And was grabbed on the shoulder by Miss Wheeler!

Screaming, Keltie tried to jerk away. Five long, red nails clawed into her blouse. With her other hand, Miss Wheeler snatched a thicket of Keltie's hair and pulled. The entire hallway swung backwards as Keltie felt her neck being stretched to its absolute limit. Above her, a pair of eyes blazed with an insane fury almost too bright to look at. Two perfect rows of white teeth gnashed and snarled. Sharp tufts of brown hair seemed to hiss at the walls like snakes.

Keltie twisted her body to the right, to the left. No good. With her boots barely touching the floor she couldn't get leverage. Miss Wheeler gave her another cruel, brutal pull. A scream, this time of pain, peeled from her lips.

"You," Miss Wheeler said, and her voice was like dark, cold night, lurking in the boughs of a forbidden forest. "You, you, you, *you*."

All Keltie could do by way of reply was sob. "Please," she begged. "Please, I'm sorry."

Another yank on the hair. Keltie hissed. Her feet drummed on the marble floor.

"I'm gonna drink your blood," Miss Wheeler's looming, lunatic face growled.

Keltie's feet stopped. "What?"

"You heard me. You blink and your name is mud. We're going to the principal's office. Together. And you're going to repeat to him everything you said to me five minutes ago. Understand?"

"I'm sorry!"

"Yes, you are. But let's find out how much."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Shut up!"

Keltie raised one boot off the floor. "I am so...*fucking*...SORRY!" And hard as she could, she stamped the toe of Miss Wheeler's dress shoe. It was a different pair of lips that let out a scream this time. Elizabeth Wheeler staggered backward and fell butt first into a janitor's mop

bucket. Soap bubbles splattered the wall.

It was time to go now—oh boy, was it ever. Two other teachers—one of them David Rhenborg—had left their classes to investigate the din. Before long it would be the entire school.

Keltie's shoulder hit the door, letting in a gust of crisp October air. The wind fled in; she fled out. Here a decision presented itself. On her right was a large, open lawn that led to Pleasant Street. That was no good. Mr. Rhenborg was tall and strong. No way in hell could she hope to beat him in a sprint. Down the left was the gymnasium. Piney hedges lined its brick wall. Good cover. Keltie ducked behind them and made her way to the corner, turned left again and crept past the kitchen windows (Taco Tuesday everybody! Smell those hot tortillas!) to the playground. There was more open space here but she thought she'd be all right if she stuck close to the building.

Keeping her butt below the windows, she slipped past the monkey bars, the swing sets. The school grounds fell away to a wooded area that wrapped Pleasant Street, shielding the south end of town from the north. They were dark on this day, and the trees were in motion beneath turbulent skies, but still Keltie wasted no time plunging their depths. She crossed the football field with leaves chasing her feet, and in seconds found a path leading into the wood.

Once behind about a dozen trees she stopped to get her breath. Her eyes scanned the path. Had anyone come in pursuit? It didn't seem so. The playground looked deserted, a temporary hostage of the cold and gray. All the same, she knew it would be lunacy to break cover while the hunt was still hot. She needed a place to lie low and think about what to do next.

Going forward, the path traced a slope that rustled with dead leaves. The woods grew darker as she walked. Colder. Creepier. Thorns clawed her arms. Twigs snapped under her boots. With a backward glance she saw that the opening to the playground had disappeared; she was at the bottom of the slope, utterly obscured.

So be it. Keltie walked on. Though she'd never been down this path, the territory it crossed was far from unfamiliar. You didn't grow up near Pleasant Street park without getting to know its boundaries. For instance, the park itself was only about a hundred yards off to the left. A much farther walk to the right (west) would eventually dump her onto the county fairgrounds. And straight ahead was a creek which used a culvert beneath Pleasant Street.

She could already hear the water, rushing through a gap in the piebald terrain. Nearby stood an ancient, moss-covered bridge made of stone. Seeing it made Keltie blink. It looked very out of place way back here in the trees. Who but a girl on the run from authority could possibly have use for such a thing?

Keltie approached the bank. The water was still high from a rainstorm the week before. High, fast, and deep. Its silver surface looked cold enough to freeze bone. Morbidly, she began to wonder what it would be like to fall in. Her foot would doubtless get stuck in the muddy bottom, forcing her to hold her breath. She had no idea how long she could do that, but it wasn't forever.

A noise from under the bridge made her jump.

Her eyes searched the buttress. The shadows were too dark to see through, however, the green moss too thick. No bother. After all, there were plenty of catfish in this creek. One of them had jumped.

But it didn't sound like a splash, girl, it sounded like a stick breaking.

A raccoon, then. Rabbit, squirrel, whatever.

Keltie walked to the bridge. The day wasn't getting any warmer, and she'd left her coat—

and her lunch bag, and all of her money—in her locker. She needed a plan—one that didn't involve going home to explain things, at least not yet. Mom might not care, but Daddy might put her in the hospital.

“Do you always think bad thoughts?” a quiet voice suddenly asked.

And Keltie's boot, still an inch from the bridge, froze. She spun around with frantic eyes, expecting whoever had spoken the question to be standing right on the bank. No one was. The water rushed on, all innocent on this chilly autumn day. The leaves continued to fall.

“Who's there?” Keltie called out.

To her complete surprise, the voice answered. “You really shouldn't,” it said. “It's bad for the blood.”

The speaker was female, her tone pretty, almost musical. Yet where this should have provided at least some comfort, Keltie could only feel dread. Spine tingling, she looked from one tree to the next, trying to locate some clue—a lock of hair, the hem of a skirt—to her companion's whereabouts.

“Where are you?” she asked, giving up the search after a few fruitless seconds.

“Under the bridge. I'm waiting to pick up my brother. He's in your class, right?”

“Under the bridge?” Keltie looked down at the high water. “How? There's no room to stand.”

“I'm not standing. My brother is Martin Calinga. Do you know him?”

She thought for a moment. Martin Calinga. Yes, the name did ring a bell.

“Well?” the girl under the bridge asked again, with what sounded like mock impatience.

“I think so,” Keltie said. “Marty, right? Do his friends call him Marty?”

“He doesn't have any friends. Just me.”

“Oh.”

“You don't have any friends either, Keltie, and that's a shame. You're a good girl.”

Keltie stepped out to the middle of the bridge. Her eyes were on the stone, the concrete, whatever it was. She wanted to put a bit more distance between herself and this other girl—this other girl who liked to hang out under muddy bridges, and who somehow knew her name.

“I have one,” Keltie said, for want of anything better.

A giggle came from the wet moss. “Oh yes, the vivacious Penelope Sitko.”

Oh wow, Keltie thought, *we are getting weirder by the minute*. Her boots shuffled another step across the bridge. “How do you know these things about me?” she asked.

“Your thoughts are easy to read,” the other girl replied. “Not simple, mind you, just easy. That happens with the angry ones.”

“I'm not angry.”

“Now that's a lie. Hey,” the voice suddenly chirruped, “do you like turtles?”

Keltie had been about to say goodbye to Marty's sister and leave. Now she hesitated. “I've never seen a turtle,” she said. “Is there one down there?”

“Indeed there is,” came the pretty voice's reply, “a great, big box turtle. Biggest shell I've ever seen. Come down and have a look.”

“Really?” Keltie took a step back towards the rail. It was made of iron, and very rusty. A kid could duck under it with ease. Maybe even slip and fall into the creek.

“I'll catch it for you, Keltie. Then you can take it home for a pet. How does that sound?”

“Cool! Do you know what they eat?”

Another giggle from the shadows. “Oh...we can talk about food. In a few minutes. But come quickly before the turtle swims away.”

Keltie had forgotten all about her unease with this odd stranger. A box turtle! She'd always

assumed that a few of them lived along the creek, but had never seen one outside of books. The idea of owning one as a pet...yeah, that was cool, all right. Better than cool. She could show it to Penelope, post pictures of it online. And feed it, of course.

Careful not to lose her balance, she knelt down under the rail. How would she carry the turtle home? How would she get it inside without Daddy seeing? Her mind began to flip through possible solutions.

"That's it," the voice coaxed, "jump down. Don't mind the water."

Keltie made a face. What she'd just heard verged on the ridiculous. To not mind the water would basically mean drowning. The current rushed a mere four feet from where she was crouching. If she jumped she'd be gone. Swept under, swept away.

"Where are you standing?" Keltie asked for the second time.

"I'm not standing," the voice repeated.

Keltie opened her mouth to reply—to tell the girl that to jump down was impossible, that all she could see was water. Then Marty Calinga's sister appeared. Her pale face slid out from under the stone, all aglow in a fan of black hair that danced in the dead leaves. Then came her shoulders, boney, like the gnarled boughs overhead.

"Why would I need to stand?" the face hissed.

Two gray, splotched arms—corpse's arms—snatched for Keltie's legs. Their length seemed out of all proportion with the creature's body, but a vertical piece of the iron railing blocked one. Flakes of rust splattered Keltie's cheeks. Screaming, she leaped back. The other arm groped and snatched at nothing for a moment, then disappeared under the bridge as if sucked down a vacuum chute.

Keltie scrambled to the opposite rail. Her back found one of the beams. She leaned against it, catching her breath, waiting for strength enough to stand and run away. It was a long time coming. Her heart raced; her knees shook. The girl had been lying prone under the bridge, face up. Lying, or perhaps clinging to the bottom like a spider.

"No way," Keltie breathed to herself. "No way, girl, come on, get a grip."

Her eyes remained locked on the place where it had all happened. The railing. The cracked, jagged concrete. Both had gone quiet. From below, water rushed on. Keltie closed her eyes. There was nothing there. Nothing had happened. It had all been a dream.

The gray arms lunged up from behind, locking around her chest before she could so much as open her mouth to scream. "*Gotcha!*" the voice moaned in her ear. "*Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha!*"

Keltie squirmed and kicked. It did no good. The arms gave a long, hard squeeze. Air plumed from Keltie's lips—*HAAAUUUUHH!*—and when she tried to breathe in again, the arms just squeezed harder.

"Shhh," she heard the other voice whisper. "It's time to talk about food now. I promised you that, didn't I? Because you're such a *good* girl."

The vice around Keltie's ribs gave a third, excruciating squeeze. One more like that would break her bones. Not that it mattered. She was blacking out, slipping away. Her lungs were locked, unable to draw breath. She was going to die. Croak. Cross over. Kick the bucket. Goodbye, world, the monster under the bridge got me. Thanks so much for warning me they were real. Heaven forbid I could have been prepared.

The fact that her mind, in extremis, had strayed to thoughts of the divine kingdom is perhaps what triggered the miracle that happened next.

"Vera!" someone called. "Vera, no! *NO!*"

The arms let go. A slow, painful breath—just enough to keep her awake—filled Keltie's

chest. Slumped against the rail, she heaved in one gasp after the next, until the color returned to her cheeks. It took time, but it happened. Darkness retreated. The world—bare branches, brown leaves—came back into focus.

Still bleary, Keltie looked up. A dark-skinned boy with black hair stood on the bridge. His face was one she knew, and one she had heard mentioned today already, at this very place.

“Marty?” she croaked.

“Run,” he told her. “Get up and run.”

“Can’t. Not yet. How’s Miss Wheeler?” She grinned as she said this last, in spite of all to the contrary.

“Still a bitch,” Marty affirmed. “Now get out of here.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

He helped her to her feet, then to the end of the bridge. That was all the further his hospitality stretched. Still feeling like she’d been swallowed up by a dream, Keltie staggered off. She glanced back only once, to see Marty still on the bridge, all alone, his gaze in the water. She also saw that his lips were moving. He was talking to someone—someone who no doubt held the opinion that Keltie was a very good girl. A very good girl indeed.

Five years later

One: A Night At the Park

“You’re all a bunch of very bad girls!”

The gym teacher stood huffing and puffing like a dog on the wrong side of a rotten fence. What she’d just seen had redefined abominable behavior at Maple City Juvenile Detention Center. Her girls, standing in the poorly lit gymnasium (shadows loitered in corners, as well as at the back of the stage, where some of the wood was so rotten it bent when you walked on it), grinned, happy for what they had accomplished. At the other end of the gym, the boys on the basketball team had stopped playing. All looked stunned; most looked ready for an encore.

“I am outraged!” the teacher—a round woman whom many of the girls had nicknamed Frog—yelled. “Infuriated! Appalled! Stupefied...and *embarrassed!* For all of you!”

Titters from up and down the row. Sneakers with pink laces turned inward. Pony-tails. Bubble gum.

“You may think it’s funny now,” the frog told them, “but once the director finds out about this, the music is going to change. Quickly. In the meantime”—she closed her eyes and took a deep breath; one chubby hand squeezed the whistle between her breasts—“I want all of you back in the locker room. You will walk there in an orderly fashion, *and put on your brassieres.*”

Laughter erupted from pretty much everywhere at this. Penelope Sitko’s was the loudest, with Keltie Burke’s close behind. Frog raised the whistle to her lips and gave it a hard blow. “*Shut up!*”

“Now tonight,” Penelope said, clipping her bra into place, “you’re going to do a lot more than flash.” She looked at the shorter girl in front of her. “I hope.”

“Don’t worry,” Keltie said. She slammed her locker closed. “I’ll throw myself at his mercy. All I ask is that he look like James Dean, kiss like Ryan Gosling, and have a bank account like Bill Gates.”

“What if he *looks* like Bill Gates?”

Keltie gave her friend a long, hard look. “Then I’m out like a shot. You’d better not be serious about that, girl. I’m—”

But Penelope was already laughing too hard to listen. Doubled over, she still stood almost as tall as Keltie. “Relax, he doesn’t. He goes to Norwalk High, but he’s not a nerd. Oh God, I love messing with your head like that.”

“And who’s your date for the night?” Keltie sneered. “Popeye?”

“Popeye?” Her friend blinked a little before getting the joke. “Oh, ha-ha. Keltie Burke made a funny. She can do cart-wheels on the balance beam, but can she slam a volleyball over the net? Or get a jar of pickles off the top shelf?”

“The kind of pickles you like don’t come in a jar, dear heart.”

“True.”

Both girls stopped for a moment. In the next, they were laughing hard enough to need oxygen. Some of the others noticed and glanced over from their own lockers, but not for long. The room was abuzz with at least a dozen different conversations to keep even the most impertinent of the throng satisfied. And besides, friendship is always one of the two strongest forces inside any detention home. The other, of course, is enmity.

The juvenile detention center in Norwalk, Ohio was gigantic. That made it very easy to escape from whenever the whim to do so came upon one of its occupants. Situated at the far

southern end of Benedict Avenue, it stretched for two entire blocks just inside the border of an old residential district, where houses built during Abraham Lincoln's time towered over enormous lawns beneath the shade of still taller elms and oaks.

The south wing belonged to the boys, and would have been a much more suitable target for what Penelope had in mind tonight, except that the section between the south and the north wing, where the girls lived, was always heavily staffed. You couldn't pass through it without introducing yourself—or crawling inside one of the mouse infested heating ducts. And in Penelope Sitko's oft spoken opinion, none of the boys residing at Norwalk JD were worth the pleasantries or the parasites. It was an opinion Keltie agreed with almost completely. Almost.

"Okay," Penelope said at present, "you ready to do this?"

They were crouched behind a fake tree outside their room. It was after dark. An empty hallway stretched to a window lit by a parking lot arc-sodium lamp.

"I'm ready," Keltie said.

"Rubbers?"

She grimaced. "What?"

"Condoms, Keltie. Did you bring any?"

"Oh fuck. No. I wasn't sure how to get them."

Penelope reached into her bag and came out with a shiny red packet made of what looked like tin foil. Without a word, she dropped it into Keltie's bag.

"Is one all I'm going to need?" she asked.

"It'll do for a start," Penelope said. "If those blue eyes of yours make him want to come back for more, ask if he has an extra."

The crept down to the window and turned left. A flight of cracked, concrete steps descended to the kitchen, where there were a great many counters to hide behind. Not that avoidance seemed to be much of an issue on this particular night. The kitchen was dark and completely deserted. Penelope counted three windows on the left wall, then walked around a block of butcher knives to grab hold of the sash.

"Help me lift this," she said.

"No."

Slowly, Penelope turned around, to find Keltie with one of the butcher knives raised over her head. An evil grin—a jack-o-lantern's grin—decorated her face, and the blue eyes she'd just been complimented on looked lunatic.

"What are you *doing*?" Penelope hissed.

"You've done wonderful work tonight, Jason, and Mommy is pleased," Keltie said back... and then collapsed into a fit of giggles.

"Will you put that thing down and help me with this?" Without waiting for her friend to comply, Penelope turned back to attempt the deed on her own. The muscles in her skinny arms went tight. The window creaked, budged. "Any time you're ready back there," she grunted.

Keltie put the knife down. Under the onslaught of both girls the window finally gave, allowing them access to a row of bushes along the north wing. Now the detention center's gigantic front lawn lay sprawled before them, a dark field of brown. It was early May—growing time. Except that nothing around the DC ever seemed to grow very well.

"For just one second," Keltie said, "you looked ready to pee yourself."

"When we get back," Penelope replied, "I'm gonna use that same knife to cut your spiky hair into a scratching post for Meow-Meow."

“Leave Meow-Meow alone. She’s having kittens soon.”

They made their way along the side of the building to a row of trees that bordered the property, and from here down to Benedict Avenue without incident. Keltie wasn’t worried much about being seen or recognized. It was nearing midnight, and the neighborhood was a sleepy one. Old houses with wide lawns and tall trees. Very few lights shined in any of the windows. In one, Keltie saw an old man and an easy chair, a book open in his hand. He did not so much as glance out to watch them pass.

“Lyons’ Park is our meeting place,” Penelope said. A cigarette appeared in her hand, which she offered to Keltie.

“On State Street?” Keltie asked, incredulous. “That’s almost a mile away.”

“It’s a nice night for a walk. Let me light that for you.”

They smoked, talked, and smoked some more as the lights of downtown Norwalk grew closer. Keltie felt excited about the meet-up. More than excited. She was almost ecstatic with anticipation. She’d dressed for the event in pure confidence, never minding that this would her first time ever, and she’d yet to even meet the boy in question. A blood-red tank top covered her thin chest. Accompanying this was a short denim skirt and a pair of black boots with buckles. It all fit together quite nicely.

“What’s his name?” Keltie suddenly wanted to know.

“Rick...something.” The other girl’s lip twisted in thought. “Dammit. I can’t remember his last name. But I know his first is Rick. He’s a friend of the guy I’m going to be with.”

“That’s all right. Is he tall?”

“Taller than you, my friend.”

Exasperated, Keltie cast her cigarette onto the street curb. “Yeah, but...is he *tall*?”

“Tall. Suave. Handsome. Debonair. James Fucking Bond.”

“All right,” Keltie said, relaxing. “So is he like...a Daniel Craig James Bond or Roger Moore?”

“Pierce Brosnan.”

“Oh I’m going to fucking eat this guy for a late supper.”

“That’s my girl.”

The handsome boy’s eyes gleamed at her. “Hi,” he said. “I’m Rick. You’re Keltie.” This last was spoken as if his partner had temporarily forgotten.

“Hi,” Keltie said.

He didn’t look like Pierce Brosnan. Nevertheless, pleasure swelled in Keltie’s chest. The kid was *definitely* tall—at least a foot more so than she—and he had muscles aplenty. Did he play football? Hockey? Both?

“So what school do you go to?” she asked instead.

“Norwalk High.”

“Cool.”

There was nobody else in the park. Over a rusted spring-horse, the two sized each other up. Penelope had already disappeared with her date, somewhere in the shadows down Baker Street. The thought that the two of them might already be halfway undressed excited Keltie. Impatient to begin, she grabbed Rick’s hand and pulled him closer.

“Ready?” she leered.

Rick smiled back. “I want to check you out first.”

“Be my guest.”

They went behind a tree, where he could push her against the bark. Keltie let it happen,

confident that the night would protect them both from prying eyes. A long, hard kiss followed. His hands crawled through her hair. Keltie took back every bit as much as Rick took, and more. She jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. This brought her skirt up all the way past the panty line. She felt Rick's hands scurry up her thigh, hesitate, and then plunge under the thin fabric to invade the sensitive crevice beneath.

"Oh my God!" she gasped. "Oh my God, yes!"

It made Rick laugh. "You're being a good girl tonight. Are you sure you're from the DC?"

"Oh, I can be *such* a good girl for you! Whenever you need me to be! I—

"Shh! What the fuck was that?"

Keltie froze between breaths. She looked at Rick, who was now looking up at the tree.

"What the fuck was what?" she demanded. "Come on Rick, don't stop."

"Something just jumped across the top of this tree."

Her head craned back to search the branches, but they were too high above, and the night too dark, to see anything. "It was just a squirrel."

"It would have had to be a pretty big fucking squirrel," Rick said, still gawping at the sky like Richard Dreyfuss in that old UFO movie. "And the damned thing had wings."

Keltie grabbed his face, pulled it down. Her nails clawed at his cheeks. "Hey," she barked, "I don't care what it was. Don't you spoil this for me. I came here for a fuck, and a fuck is what I'm going to get. Understand?" He didn't nod right away, and his mouth still hung open, so she slapped him. "*Understand?*"

"Yes," the boy gibbered finally. "Yes."

"Good. Now put your hand back where it was. *Put it back, I said!*" Tentatively, Rick's fingers found her crevice once more and slipped inside. "Good. That's it. Oh my God, that is so it."

"I thought Penny said you were a virgin."

Barely hearing these words, Keltie began to rock her hips. Rick's mouth came to her neck. His hot breath, smelling of pizza, plumed. In between pepperoni kisses she somehow found the buckle of his belt and got it open. His jeans went loose. Keltie yanked them down with her legs, underwear and all. Dry, spindly hairs scratched the insides of her thighs. She drew a deep breath, let it out, drew another. There was a whisper of fabric on soft skin as Rick slipped her panties down.

"Baby?" she gasped, her head in the stars.

"I'm here."

"Is that your dick I feel on my leg?"

The kisses stopped. "Yes, ma'am."

"Can I touch it? Please let me touch it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her small hand, decorated with black nail polish, groped at Rick's pelvis. It didn't grope for long. The knob of his brick hard cock slipped right between her fingers, giving them access to a burning shaft of skin dressed in wiry hairs.

Keltie's eyes flew open wide. "Whoa!"

Rick's arms lifted her tank top over her bra. "Do you like?"

"I like, I like! Holy shit, is this for real?"

He gave another laugh. "Last time I checked it was pretty real, yes."

Keltie opened her mouth. To say what—or do what—she didn't know, and never found out, for that was when a suave, older voice called from the swing set:

"Mister? You have five seconds to get away from that girl. If you take any longer, I promise

the only intimacy you will ever know from this time forward will be with regret.”

Rick’s head snapped around. Beyond his shoulder, Keltie could see a dark figure idling next to one of the baby baskets. He was tall, he was black, he had a moustache...

And Rick dropped her before she could discern anything else. Her butt hit the ground hard. She yelped and let out a curse—*Ow! Goddammit!*—just as Rick stumbled and fell on his own ass. Keltie found the nearest object within reach, a small rock, and winged it at the boy’s head. It missed by a country mile, but found the window of an old car parked across the street, cracking the glass.

“Fuck!”

“Was he hurting you, Miss?” the suave black man asked. He was coming closer. A pair of black boots glided through the grass.

“No,” Keltie told him. “No, no.”

At that moment she realized something: Her butt was bare. Blades of grass poked at it, scratched it. This because Rick had pulled her panties down in the seconds before Lando Calrissian had decided to contribute his two cents to their tryst. Now all she had was her skirt.

“Stop!” she commanded.

The dark man froze. “Are you all right?”

“Oh I am absolutely peachy keen. Just don’t come any closer.” Her head whipped to the left, whipped to the right. The panties in question were black. Of course they were black. Why make them easy to find in the middle of the night with some weird guy hovering just ten feet away?

“Young man?” the weirdo was saying to Rick. “Get up. Get dressed. Go away. Now.”

Rick didn’t need a second invitation. Keltie saw him spring to his feet like an obscene jack-in-the box (*a jack-off-in-a-box*, she thought). He fumbled his pants and underwear back to where they were supposed to be, then tore off down Baker Street without a word.

“Chivalry,” the black man said, staring after him in disgust. “What a regal display.”

Keltie had gone way past giving a fuck about chivalry. Her panties were still gone. Things were edging into emergency territory here. She needed to cover herself up and get back on her feet so as to deal with whoever this stranger was.

“*Dammit!*” she hissed.

Where the fuck had the fucking things gone? Three minutes ago they’d been down around her ankles. In the time since they’d apparently grown wings like one of her goddamned napkins and flown off.

“I’m calling the police!” she yelled out, in a desperate attempt to knock the other off balance.

“Whatever for?” came his velvety reply. He had not moved from where she’d told him to stop, but his eyes were on her. Oh, were they ever.

Squeezing her knees together, Keltie said: “Well, you’ve sort of put a damper on my night.” A scowl tore across her face. She reached to find another rock to throw and—holy shit with roasted turkey and mashed potatoes!—found her panties instead.

“Are you all right?” the man asked a second time.

Keltie whipped the panties on fast enough to impress an Amish girl, then leaped to her feet, smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt. “Get away from me,” she told him.

“My name is Mr. Bolt.”

“Fuck off, Mr. Bolt. I mean it.”

“But the man was hurting you.”

He looked bemused, yet the tilt of his head was so slight, the shine in his eyes so steady, it

was hard to tell for certain. He wore a black dress shirt, tucked into a pair of tightly pressed slacks. A gold chain hung from his collar; a gold watch around his wrist.

It took less than five seconds for Keltie to take all this in. Then she said to him: "He wasn't hurting me. We were having fun. Which you ruined."

Mr. Bolt's head tilted a little more. "I'm sorry," he said, cool as the glass of a summer drink on the beach. "I would be more than happy to redeem my mistake." His boots moved a step closer to Keltie.

"*Help!*" she screamed.

"Or not," Mr. Bolt allowed.

He froze in his tracks, staring at Keltie. His eyes, she noticed for the first time, had taken on a strange orange glow from Norwalk's flickering, oft-vandalized streetlamps. Keltie blinked. Maybe it wasn't the lamps. The man's pupil's burned. There was fire in them. Shimmering, dancing fire. Was he sick? Did he have some terminal illness that affected pigment? Probably not. Bolt looked strong. His arms were solid, his posture steady. And whether Keltie cared to admit it or not, that mustache was cool. Ice cool. A perfect counterpoint to the flare in his gaze.

"I want you to forgive my intrusion," Bolt said. He took another step in Keltie's direction. This time, she didn't yell stop. "Leisure time is very important to me as well, and I find it abhorrent that I've spoiled some of yours."

"It's all right," Keltie said, feeling more pacified by the second. "Really."

"Thank you," replied the poised, polished man who now towered a mere three feet from where she stood. "But I feel I can do more. I feel I can help you feel even...less reluctant about what happened." His brow twitched. "Yes?"

"You're a kind man," she uttered. A scent of chocolate—chocolate!—wafted from his attire. All thoughts of screaming for help, of running away, had disappeared. Keltie wanted to know more about this handsome stranger—this handsome, mysterious stranger, all glowing eyes and sweet smells, who had appeared from beneath the trees. For the sake of heat, for the sake of desire, she wanted to know more.

"It is only logical," Mr. Bolt said. His voice was a midnight cruise on sparkling ocean waters. "Kindness begets kindness."

"Yes."

Bolt smiled. "Yes."

At some point during their exchange he had moved close enough to put his arms around her. To Keltie's frustration, he did not. But at least the frustration was short-lived, for in the next instant, Mr. Bolt leaned forward and began to kiss her lightly about the neck.

Keltie felt her knees buckle. She fell forward onto Bolt's massive chest. And here she was again, for the second time tonight. Alone with a boy. No, not a boy, a *man*, tall and powerful. Handsome, composed. He was perfect. Way, way better than Rick. Jumping into Bolt's arms would be like jumping into the seat of a new truck.

Eager to experience the sensation, she gasped a deep breath. Her boots left the ground. She held the breath for a moment longer, then let it plume into the side of his face.

"You're very beautiful," Bolt whispered. "Very...*arrrgghh!*"

Bolt began to stagger backward. He dropped Keltie on her ass (second time tonight for that, too) in a fit of coughs and gags and any number of other unpleasant guttural sounds. His hand foundered out to grasp the frame of the swing-set. The metal beneath his fingers crumpled. It must have been very cheap, old, rusty metal indeed, Keltie had time to think. Maybe Belfast had used the same kind for the hull of the Titanic.

“Oookay, then!” Bolt gasped, doubled over. “We’re done!”

“What’s the matter?” Keltie asked.

His face wrinkled at her in pure disgust. “You *smoke*?”

“Like a chimney,” she shrugged. “So what?”

“Oh...fuck! Oh fuck!” Clutching his abdomen, Bolt ran over to a nearby row of bushes and was violently sick. The sound of vomit hitting the ground in great glops reached Keltie’s ears.

Anger flooded her. She’d never been intimate with a guy before, but was very quickly learning they were all wimps. First Rick, who was afraid of bullies, and now Mr. Bolt, the Surgeon General of sex partners. Well fuck both of them—or rather, let both of them go fuck somebody else. Maybe each other. And...and...

And had Penelope really told Rick that she was a virgin?

She jumped to her feet to find Bolt looking at her, still bent over, his mouth open.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” the open mouth managed in between raspy breaths. “Ever.”

“Fuck off,” Keltie said.

“Yes,” Bolt nodded. “I think I will.”

“Loser.”

“Bitch.”

“Coward.”

“Factory.”

Keltie blinked. “Factory?”

“Yeah, factory,” Bolt thundered back, his voice defensive. “Factories *smoke*! Like you! You’re a fucking factory!”

Keltie waved him off. Through the corner of her eye she could see two figures—one of them Penelope—approaching from Baker Street. Time to go home. Thank Christ.

“Whatever,” she told Bolt. “Just get out of here. Go away. Here.” She reached into the pocket of her skirt, found a nickel, and tossed it at him. “Go find a peppermint candy machine if you can’t stand the smell.”

“Yo, biiitch!” came a cheerful voice from Baker Street.

That was Penelope, all right. Keltie looked at her and waved. When she turned her head back towards the bushes, she saw that Bolt had gone.

“What’s shakin’ baby?” Penelope said. Her eyes were shiny, her step springy. Next to her stood a tall, handsome boy, yeah yeah yeah, blah blah blah. So she’d gotten her sausage dinner tonight. Whoop-dee-doo, twenty-three skidoo. The two of them approached her and looked around for a few moments. Saying nothing, Keltie stood her ground. “Where’s Rick,” her friend finally asked.

Giving a brief nod to Rick’s friend, Keltie said: “He went off to take a shit somewhere.”

It made Penelope laugh. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. I was that good.”

“You must have been. What did you do to him, girl?”

Keltie rubbed her eyes and told them she was pretty sure she was a natural with boys. A perfect natural.

“High five!” Penelope cheered.

Their hands clapped in mid-air. *A perfect natural*, Keltie thought. *A perfect natural disaster*.

Two: Showboat

For the rest of that spring Keltie kept very much to herself. When not in class, she spent most of her time with one of Penelope's trash romance books, or on Frog's ancient gymnasium balance beam. She had gained a reputation with the latter activity amongst the other girls, besting all of them in the basic moves—turns, leaps, jumps—as well as the more complicated tricks. Some even asked for lessons, which she gladly gave, provided they had the contraband. Norwalk paid its legitimate teachers in bank deposits; Keltie took her wages under the table. Cigarettes and mix tapes, chewing gum and Coca-Cola.

"You're a natural, you know that?" Penelope said one evening.

"I practice a lot actually," Keltie told her.

"I practice shooting baskets a lot. I'm still pretty bad at it."

"You weren't that bad tonight."

May skidded into June. The weather outside, balmy already for the time of year, grew hot. Keltie woke up most mornings with sunlight streaming through the window that let on Benedict Avenue. By noon, most of the detention center's classrooms were hot enough to be uncomfortable. Girls stretched and yawned at their desks. Homework papers, folded into makeshift fans, waved.

By the time final exam week arrived students were demanding fans of the electric variety. Some of these were provided by the DC, others were brought in by the teachers. The one in Keltie's class turned out to be particularly large, so it was with papers and pencils flying in a hurricane gale that she took her finals.

Herman Melville's Dick, the paper before her read. A gust of air swept her bangs. The paper changed. *Herman Melville's Moby Dick*, it now pronounced.

"Of course," Keltie said.

She went on to flunk the Dick portion of her test. And why not? She'd already done it once earlier in the year. Later that afternoon Penelope informed her the DC would be orchestrating a work outlet program for its less troublesome residents. The only requirement was a visit to the vice principal's office to fill out a form.

"And then what happens?" Keltie asked from her bed. "The DC places us?"

"Correct," Penelope said. She took off her t-shirt and tossed it into a laundry basket. "You should sign up. Stop moping around. It depresses me."

"I've been on a Sylvia Plath kick lately," Keltie had to admit.

"You don't have to tell me. Or any of the other girls."

"It's that obvious?"

The bra came off next, so Penelope's boney chest was completely bare when she turned and said: "You've been like a hermit. You hardly ever leave this room. People are starting to ask if we're lesbians."

Keltie's jaw dropped. "Really? Come on."

"Really. You're the brooder who dresses in black and I'm the LPGA inspired golfer."

"Ha! Drive that range, girl!"

Penelope didn't laugh. She put on a fresh bra, a fresh shirt, then told Keltie in a quiet voice: "Put on something pink. Then we'll go downstairs and sign up."

"I don't want to work."

"Neither do I. But it will get us away from this creepy building four nights a week. We can even request to be placed together."

But Keltie could only shake her head. She tossed the book she'd been reading aside—*Breathless Girl*, by Frankie Plume—and told Penelope thanks but no thanks. She had no use these days for strange new places and strange new people. Did her friend even remember how they'd gotten locked up in this creepy building to begin with?

"The boy I was with that night told me it was his dad's car," Penelope said, "as I've already told you a hundred times."

"Penny, he was thirteen years old. The boy I was with that night told me he had a motorcycle."

"And he did!"

"Yeah. In a box. And when I asked him what a change lever was he showed me the lock on his bathroom door."

"This time it'll be different, Kel. No boys. No bullshit. Just work. For pay," Penelope added, seeing her friend grimace at the dreaded *W* word.

Keltie let a long, tired sigh rush from her lips. Having a best friend could be a real pain in the ass sometimes. In all of the old Star Trek movies she'd ever seen, Captain Kirk always seemed to talk Spock into some crazy escapade. Sherlock Holmes often criticized Doctor Watson for documenting his cases as entertainment. And Robin was always fucking things up for Batman.

"Don't expect much," she said at last.

"Of course not."

"If one asshole customer tells me reheat his soup, I'm gone."

"Keltie—"

"If one asshole boss gives me shit about my make-up, I'm gone."

"Keltie."

"And don't even think about covering for sickies."

"Keltie?"

She blinked. "What?"

"You're a real hardcore bitch, you know that?"

Both girls stared at each other in the afternoon sunlight that shined through the window. Keltie's resolve broke first. She started to giggle, and then laugh like a loon. By that time Penelope had joined her. She grabbed a My Little Pony pillow and winged it at Keltie's head. Nobody would hire them—Keltie was sure of that. They sucked at everything they tried. Nobody would hire them.

Nobody.

"Ladies," the head waiter said, "this is an easy job. Just smile. Be polite." He glanced over his shoulder at the crowded restaurant for a moment before continuing in a lower tone. "And for fuck's sake, don't fuck up any orders! *Capeesh?*"

"*Capeesh*," both girls said together.

The head waiter scowled, then disappeared into the dining area, leaving the girls to sink or swim on their own. Keltie thought the analogy a fitting one, as the restaurant they'd been placed at was a converted ferry called The Showboat. It was docked between a quarry and a beach on Sandusky Bay. The local newspaper often commented on this being a less than suitable location, as one side of the vessel always smelled of salt, while the other carried a distinct odor of dead fish and rock moss. Keltie had no idea if this was true—yet—but all the same, she *did* want to smack Penelope upside the head for getting her into this mess.

The dining area looked like a zoo. It was a Saturday night in the middle of June, and the

seafood lovers were out in droves, sipping their wine, clanging their forks. And worst of all, raising their hands for service. All the waiters moved at a near frantic pace beneath the golden lights, the crystal chandeliers. A terrible band had been booked for the weekend. The guitar player had the distortion on his amp cranked so high that every chord he played sounded the same. In the middle of his set he gave Keltie a wink. Keltie gave him the finger.

"Romance in the air," Penelope sang as she swooped past with a tray of oysters.

"Fuck off," she said.

"Miss Burke!" a deep, male voice boomed from her shoulder.

"Oh fuck."

She turned to face a round man with a bald head and a black mustache. The manager. In an effort to look composed, she straightened her blouse, smoothed over her skirt. Fat chance.

"The Showboat," her manger said, "is not Denny's. It is not Berry's. Or Johnny Angel's. Or The Shake Shack."

"Yes, sir."

"The word *fuck* is not in our vocabulary."

"No, sir."

He nodded. "Very well. Please refresh the water at table six, as your customers asked you to do five minutes ago."

"But I need to pee," Keltie winced.

This was not a lie. Her bladder had grown heavy over the past hour, though no one seemed disposed to give her a breather. Now the issue was close to dire.

"Hold it," the bald manager snipped.

She took care of the table and made it to the ladies room with barely a moment to spare. The deluge came just as she was bending to sit down. Breathing deeply, Keltie put her head between her legs until every last drop had fallen. Then she reached into her bag. There was a pack of bubble gum at the bottom. Underneath that, cigarettes.

I'd like to see the fat bastard say no to this, she thought, popping a Capri between her lips.

Her thumb was just about to flick on her lighter when she looked up and saw it—a sprinkler fixture. "Goddammit!" she hissed. "Goddammit all to fucking hell!"

"What's your damage, girl?" someone outside the stall asked.

"Penny? That you?"

"It ain't Jessica Rabbit."

Keltie threw the smoking paraphernalia back into her bag and got dressed. A savage pleasure swelled in her chest. Now that she finally had Penelope alone, shit was going to hit the fan.

"I hate this job!" she said, yanking the stall door open. "I hate this job, and you...you..."

Penelope stood outside the door, smiling. In her hand was a large baggie of weed.

"You are," Keltie said, "the best friend a girl could ever have."

"I thought you'd say something like that," the taller girl winked. "Now let's go find someplace to get high."

That someplace turned out to be a storage room on the lower deck, deep within the ship's hull. Keltie blindly followed her friend through a few swinging doors off the kitchen, then down several shadowy flights of stairs that let on even more shadowy corridors. Occasionally Penelope would stop and try a door. One after the next turned out to be locked, however, obliging them to plunge further and further below decks.

The storage room lay at the end of the darkest corridor yet. A flickering orange bulb

showed them a passage cluttered with old life preservers.

"No way that's going to be unlocked," Keltie said, her eyes on the latch.

"Check it and see," Penelope said. "I'll stand guard here."

Keltie walked to the door. It came open with a rusty creak. Pitch blackness waited on the other side. "Now what?" she called over her shoulder. "I can't see."

"Try your lighter, genius."

Keltie began to rummage through her bag. Cool, musty air crept from inside the room. Water lapped at unseen walls. She found the lighter, clicked it on.

A hand clamped down on her shoulder.

"Boo!" Penelope said.

"Stop that! Help me find a light switch."

It was on the left—a knob that turned with a heavy snap. A large room full of steel shelves came into view under light barely bright enough to see in. Cardboard boxes of every size were stacked on these shelves. Ancient silverware glowed in dust-covered velvet bedding. Cracked plates. Broken picture frames.

"It's a junk room," Penelope whispered.

Keltie went to one of the shelves and opened a box. Dust plumed in her face. Inside was a plastic Christmas wreath. Santa Claus grinned from a ring of gnarled, fake flowers. *Ho! Ho! Ho!* he bellowed at Keltie.

"Green Giant," Keltie sang back.

"What?"

She closed up the box. "Nothing. Is this room good enough?"

"I suppose," Penelope shrugged. "But let's light up in back."

They plunged deeper into the boxes. Shadows grew larger; the room got darker. As they made their way further from the door Keltie noticed the boxes had gotten larger as well. Some were now the size of living room furniture. *Convenient*, she thought. *It'll give us some space to roll a good sized joint.*

"Hand it over," she said, once they reached the back wall.

Penelope dropped the bag into her hand. Keltie opened it, and was just about to reach inside when Penelope said: "What's that?"

She was pointing at a long, wooden crate about five feet from where they stood. Keltie looked at it without much interest. It was just another box—larger than the others, but still just a box. In fact the lid would provide a pretty good place for her handiwork.

"It looks like a coffin," Penelope's voice whispered.

"I suppose. Give me some light over here, will you?"

"Let's open it."

The bag slipped from Keltie's fingers, bringing a curse to her lips. "Now look what you made me do! I lost our stash!"

"Relax. It's right under the coffin."

"Yeah, yeah." Keltie knelt down, scuffing her black waitress stockings on the filthy floor. She reached under, found the bag—

And something inside the crate knocked three times.

In a flash, Keltie shot to her feet. "Did you hear th—"

"I heard it," Penelope, slack-jawed, said. "Now we *really* need to open it."

"I disagree."

Keltie was backing away from the coffin now. A coffin, she suddenly decided, was exactly the right word for it. Brown planks of unfinished wood had been hammered crudely together

with rusty nails that jabbed at them like rose thorns. A lid that did not fit right lay over the top. Keltie was reminded of the days when she used to catch grasshoppers and trap them inside old Tupperware containers with a book.

She opened her mouth to tell Penelope they should leave—like right now—when her friend stepped forward and pushed the lid off on her own. Penelope then peered inside. Moments later her lungs gave a quick, hard gasp.

“Well?” Keltie said.

“Come here.”

“Do I have to?”

She went back to the coffin feeling like someone had a hand around her throat. Her eyes dropped. The weak light revealed a boney white figure dressed in a long shirt that looked to be made of silk. Two deep-set eyes—shut—were nestled in a bald head with pointed ears. A thatch of gnarled vines were curled together on the figure’s chest, and where its feet were supposed to be Keltie saw two talons that looked strong enough to clutch a dead tree at midnight.

A slow, appreciative smile spread over her face. “That,” she said to Penelope, “is so, so cool.”

“They must go all out for Halloween on this boat.”

“Yeah. I’m not sure I’d be able to eat with one of these hanging over my table, though.”

Penelope slowly reached to touch one of the gnarled hands. Craftsmanship was not Keltie’s specialty, but she thought this piece would look scary even in a well-lit room. Back and forth went Penelope’s fingers, evaluating the ornament’s texture.

“What’s it made out of?” Keltie wanted to know.

The other girl froze. Her eyes went to the ornament’s head. A chilly mix of confusion, fear, and doubt began to take hold of her features.

“Penny?”

The ornament’s eyes flew open. Penelope screamed, but already her wrist was caught—snapped by one of the clawed vines. A white face with red eyes rose from the coffin. It opened a mouthful of rusty scissor-blades and hissed.

“Keltie!” Penelope screamed.

“*KELTIEEEEE!*” the monster shrieked back. “*KELTIEEEEE!*”

Keltie turned and grabbed a box off one of the shelves. Something rattled inside of it—she didn’t care what, as long as it would effectively cold-cock whoever the hell this creep was.

“Asshole!” she yelled, raising the box high.

Two blood-red eyes glared at her for a moment. Then the monster gave a yank, opened its gigantic maw, and bit off Penelope’s head.

The box fell from Keltie’s hands. Her feet staggered. Penelope’s body collapsed to the floor, fingers clawing at the place where her head had been. They couldn’t find it. Bloody bone and torn tissue were all that remained. *What’s wrong with my head? What’s wrong with my head?*

Gasping for breath, Keltie looked at the monster. A thick strand of her friend’s hair hung from its mouth. The red eyes looking back seemed pleased with their prey. The monster was a cat, Penelope’s head was a mouse. Blinking, the cat bit down. Bone crunched in its jaws.

It was enough for Keltie—way, way more than enough. She ran back down the aisle, tripped on one of the boxes and fell hard. One of her nails broke; one of her shoes flew off. From the coffin came another long, dry hiss, followed by scratchy, dragging footsteps.

“*Keltieeee,*” the monster’s tongue slithered.

She spun around, expecting to see it at the foot of the aisle. But no. Nothing stood in the pale orange light. Penelope's feet lay twisted at an odd angle towards the coffin. Something that might have been blood shined on the floor.

The footsteps came closer, closer...and passed by in the aisle opposite. Keltie's whole body felt frozen to the floor. She had no idea what to do now. The monster was making its way towards the exit, blocking her escape. She was trapped. Powerless.

Like a girl underwater, she reached up to grab one of the smaller boxes from the shelf. Her only chance at survival was to find a weapon. In a room like this, there just had to be one somewhere. Her fingers scurried inside the box. They came out with a plastic, toy spider. Scary. Keltie might have screamed had Penelope surprised her with it back at the DC. Tonight it was nothing more than a goddamned joke. Delving again, her hand closed around an old jump rope. That wouldn't work, either, unless the monster felt inclined to do calisthenics between kills.

"Keltieeeeeee!" she heard it call for the third time.

There was a click as it turned the switch by the door, and the lights went out, pitching everything into utter blackness.

Keltie inhaled the deepest breath she could into her lungs. Holding it, she reached back into the box. Sharp metal grazed her fingers. What was this? There were teeth along the metal, leading down to what felt like a cheap wooden handle.

She grabbed the handle. It was a knife. Not a big knife—it felt like something a child might use to cut steak upstairs—but a knife all the same. Kicking off her other shoe, Keltie rose to her knees. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark—a little. The shelves on either side of her were three tiers high. She stuck the knife in between her teeth and climbed to the top of the nearest one. The blouse she had on didn't seem to like that idea very much; it got snagged on the sharp end of a protruding screw and tore itself wide open. Keltie didn't care. She was too busy listening for the monster, too busy thinking about cold, bony hands wrapping around her ankle, yanking her back.

Once at the top she began to duck-walk towards the door, keeping her balance just as easily in the dark as she would have in the light. A dead mouse lay snapped in a trap, its neck broken. Keltie picked it up and tossed it across the room. A hiss came from the monster. More footsteps. It was chasing after the mouse.

That's it, Keltie thought, that's it, you idiot, stay stupid for just a couple more minutes.

She reached the end of the shelf. Directly below was the exit. If she could move fast enough, she might just get out of this place alive. With one last look towards where she'd pitched the mouse, she let herself drop silently to the floor. Her fingers closed around the handle, pulled.

And the door squeaked on its hinges, putting an end to the whole charade.

The storage room shook with a loud snarl that sent Keltie down the hall, her blouse in tatters, her mind the same. What in the actual fuck was chasing her, anyway? It had red eyes and pointed ears. It had bitten off Penelope's head and eaten it. Couldn't it at least be possible this was all just a dream? That maybe she and Penny had inhaled some bad dope?

That was it—the dope. It was bad fucking dope. She hadn't dropped it under that coffin after all. They'd opened it, rolled it, smoked it. And now they were both really, really fucked up.

"Penelope!" Keltie screamed. "Stop chasing me, you crazy bitch!"

She turned back just as the monster pounced. Its claws struck Keltie's chest, knocking the air from her lungs. An empty fish aquarium fell off its stand and smashed; breaking glass flew

everywhere. She hit the floor. More air rushed from her lungs. It was air that she couldn't get back, because in the time it took to recover her bearings, the monster had its claw around her throat, and its grip was strong.

"GN! UH!"

Really, really strong. Keltie's tiny fists were useless. She couldn't hit back hard enough, nor could her legs seem to find anything to kick but empty space. She arched her spine, bringing the bare ribs of her seething chest up high enough to brush against the monster's cold skin.

"NNM!"

Let me breathe, you sick freak, come on, give a girl some air!

The monster's red eyes widened; its pointy grin leered. On no part of its features could Keltie see that her request had been received. And oh God, were her lungs on fire now. She'd been choked off for as long as a fifteen year-old delinquent could stand it, wriggling, squirming, twisting to get free. But the monster had her. It had her, and it meant to see her die.

SOMEBODY HELP ME PLEASE!

Keltie, Penelope said from somewhere in back of her mind, *when we get back, I'm gonna use that same knife to cut your spiky hair into a scratching post for Meow-Meow.*

She blinked. The knife! Where was it? She'd dropped it just as she'd hit the floor. Her hand began to slap at the dust and dirt near her head. Time was running out. Dark blotches stained her field of vision. She needed that knife. But where was it? Pebbles of dirt scratched her knuckles, got under her nails. She wasn't going to make it. Breath had failed her, muscle had failed her, and now luck was failing her, too. Game over, girl. You lost.

Her hand closed around the knife handle. With maybe five seconds to spare, Keltie thrust the blade forward and up, deep into the monster's chest. It let go of her, yet she almost drowned anyway, for the fountain of blood that sprayed from its heart painted her entire torso a furious, tacky red. Her torn blouse, her brassiere, were instantly soaked. Screaming at this act of defiance, the monster attempted to regain control by reaching once more for its victim's throat. But it was game over for the other team this time. The monster's strength was all but gone. It fell forward onto Keltie's chest, pluming rotten breath into her face.

"Fuck...you," Keltie managed through her tortured throat.

The monster blinked, opened its mouth...and with the last, dying beat of its heart, threw up all over Keltie's head. Green chunks of Penelope's brains splattered her cheeks and hair. Shards of bone from Penelope's skull sprinkled over her neck. Then the monster was lying still as stone on top of her. Dead.

"Where the fuck are those two bitches?" the bald manager growled.

No one in the Showboat's frenzied kitchen had an answer. Men and women dressed in white shook their heads, shrugged their shoulders. They quite literally had different fish to fry and couldn't be concerned with who carried those fish out the kitchen's swinging doors.

Snarling, the manager shoved the door open. On the other side stood one more of the many WP losers from Norwalk's detention home—a quiet, vacant-eyed Filipino named Marty something.

"You!" the manager said. "Have you seen Miss Burke?"

The Filipino shook his head. "No, sir."

"How about Miss Sitko?"

Again with the head shake. The kid was not only clumsy about taking orders, but stupid as

well. The manager brushed past him without another word. His eyes roved back and forth over the dining area. Oh, was it crowded tonight! He'd never seen so many white, BMW-driving snobs and high class whores together in one place. And every goddamned one of them seemed to be hungry for something different. It was enough to make the manager want to piss in their after dinner coffee.

"Excuse me," one of the BMW drivers said, raising his finger. "Can we get some coffee at this table, please?"

The manager smiled back. "Oh, absolutely. It's no trouble at all."

The driver nodded. Then something on the other side of the room seemed to catch his attention. His eyes did a double-take. Moments later, they were wide as hard-boiled eggs.

What the hell? the manager thought.

Some of the other diners noticed what was happening. They followed the driver's stunned gaze across the room. One by one, every table in the entire restaurant went dead silent. The manager, too, became stunned, so much so that he swayed on his feet, and had to grab hold the BMW driver's shoulder to keep from falling down. Nobody could breathe, or so it seemed later on, when he tried to remember what he'd seen.

The girl was covered in blood. Her hair hung in a mangled mess. Torn shreds of what had once been a blouse lay limp around her waist. Her eyes looked dead.

Slowly, like steam dissipating over a hot stove, the silence broke apart. Shocked whispers spread across the tables. One man stood up—perhaps in an effort to help—and fell right back into his chair. Meanwhile the manager noticed something about the girl's bloody blouse. A glimmer of gold, shining in the chandelier light. It was a name badge.

She's one of mine, he thought. Holy shit and fried eggs, she's one of mine.

The girl stumbled forward to one of the tables. Her face remained blank. Both of her shoes, the manager noticed, were missing, and the stockings beneath the hem of her skirt were torn.

"Welcome to The Showboat," she said at the table, with a sudden smile that looked absolutely lunatic. "Welcome to The Showboat. May I take your order? Welcome to The Showboat. May I take your order?"

Three: Visiting Mom

Keltie would never be sure of her sanity again.

That was a given, no matter what the school psychiatrist said, or the councilors (who spoke to her for the rest of that summer as if to a newborn baby, all coos and compassion), or the girls in her gymnastics class. Thoughts and feelings could no longer be trusted. Her eyes had become fabulists. Every shadowy corner held a secret, every empty staircase, a phantom. At night, strange noises came from the hallway outside her room. During the day, giggles from the other girls became lunatic laughter. And the storage area in the basement, where councilors sometimes sent the kids to fetch decorations for the holidays? Forget it.

Keltieeee, her mind whispered in a raspy voice when she tried to go to sleep. *Keltieeee*, it whispered some more as she read a book, or washed dishes in the cafeteria.

It was enough to drive a girl insane.

"You're not going insane," the psychiatrist assured one hot afternoon. "It doesn't work that way. The mind doesn't just *break*. It takes years, Keltie. Assuming of course you weren't born wacko to begin with."

"I think maybe I was," she said. The vinyl couch felt sticky on her back, even with the fan going. And it didn't help that the shrink's office was on the fourth floor, which in August sweltered like a jungle.

"Now now," the shrink said. He always said that when he couldn't think of a more proper response. *Now now, don't be that way. Now now, we mustn't think such things.*

"I saw something once," she went on, hoping to gain some spark of genius from the man.

But he refused to take the bait. "Everyone sees things, Keltie. Every day."

"Yeah, but this one time in the woods, when I was a little girl—"

"Now now. You're not going to tell me the story of Little Red Riding Hood, are you?" The doctor leaned back in his chair, puffing a pipe as if this were the most brilliant witticism in all the world.

"I hadn't intended to."

"Not that it would necessarily be a bad thing. You saw your friend murdered by a lunatic. A madman. Escapism to a bit of fantasy may be just the right medicine you need."

Keltie rolled her eyes. Where the hell had the DC found this guy? The Price Is Right? Nodding, she thanked him for his input and promised to get started on Peter Pan as soon as she got back to her room.

August became September. Classes started up again. Science, math, history. Keltie held no interest in any. On the first day of school she made certain to get a desk in the very back row, though this was a decision that soon gave cause for regret. Here, the girls were every bit as crazy or maybe even crazier than she. A chief indicator came from Sadie, who showed up wearing a black sleeveless shirt that said GOTH BITCHES RULE on the front. Sadie's hair was orange. She had a nose ring. Sadie looked really fucked up.

"SCIENCE!" the teacher bellowed, causing several of the girls to scream.

"Jesus Christ," Keltie let out.

"Science is the basis for all things in the universe. Without science we are idiots. Morons. Pooping cavemen cowering in fear of the dinosaurs."

Keltie slumped in her seat. Cavemen and dinosaurs, sure, why not? And maybe a flying saucer or two. The earth was flat; the moon was made of blue cheese. *Tell it like it is, fella*, she thought, *tell it like it is*.

In October the DC agreed to turn her loose on the streets.

Sort of.

It was connect with family month, an affair that meant zero to most of the kids, whose relatives either wanted nothing to do with them or were already dead. An acquaintance of Keltie's, Angel Reece, had a father in prison and a mother eloping with a crystal meth addict. Melissa Manfredjenson's dad was in hiding from the FBI. Polly Eberle's mom had killed herself with pills.

This wasn't to say the parking lot out front was always empty. A few beat up cars would occasionally roll in, driven by men with beards, blue jeans, and leather jackets, or women who looked too tired to even lift their eyes from their shoes. Grandparents were also a common sight. Kindly old men, sweet little old ladies. People from another era who had tried their best to cultivate the crops they'd laid, and failed. Keltie watched them all come and go, most of the time from her worn curtain on the third floor. The room behind her, once musical with Penelope's upbeat chatter, had become a haunted place—a branch where dead, headless memories came to roost. It all felt rather insane, whether the psychiatrist thought so or not. Keltie wanted none of it.

But they let her outside anyway. The school's less troublesome students (i.e. the ones who had never been caught breaking the rules) were given the opportunity to visit relatives at home addresses within the city. Both of Keltie's parents were still in Norwalk, though she'd not laid eyes on them for two years. The idea of putting an end to this drought didn't excite her much but going outside on her own certainly did; thus, she accepted the school's rare willingness to take a risk with a student, and under a symphony of autumn leaves one windy Saturday morning, struck off down Benedict Avenue to visit her mother.

The address turned out to be a Jefferson Street trailer park. The neighborhood was not one Keltie felt comfortable visiting. Tucked away near the rail yards on the south end of town, the journey took nearly an hour to complete. Empty tracks stretched across a road dotted with shabby, two-story houses. An old general store, its windows boarded, slept on one corner like a dead cockroach. On another was a bar—TJ's—pumping with loud music.

Keltie kept walking. Her boots scuffed candy wrappers and broken glass. A smelly breeze swept under her skirt, making her feel molested. Where the hell was the trailer park? The address given by the DC, Sunset Lane, didn't seem to exist.

"Hey, baby," somebody called.

Keltie turned to see a man leering from a flaked porch. A bottle of beer rested in his hand. Three more were on the railing.

"Anytime, anywhere, beautiful."

Her boot slipped on the remains of a squashed pumpkin and she almost fell. The man cackled. Another pumpkin, this one carved, grinned from the steps of a rusty trailer home.

Trailer home!

Shutting the beer drinker out of her mind, Keltie took a gravel drive that let on a circle of perhaps ten more rusty, sagging trailers. This had to be the illustrious Sunset Lane, though there was no welcome sign. Trailer number six—Mom's—looked somehow worse than all the others. It had once been white but today settled for mostly orange. A set of crooked iron steps led to a broken door handle. Keltie knocked, waited, knocked again.

The door came open. What it revealed almost made Keltie turn around and go back to the detention center. The woman opposite had long stalks of gray straw for hair. Her eyes were two jagged rocks thrown into a cloudy puddle. A splash of cheap, fake blood made up her lips,

with a veined lily pad of a nose floating above.

“Who are you?” Keltie asked, all disbelief.

The jagged rocks bulged to the surface. “I’m your mom, you silly bitch. Now get in here.”

They sat at a checkered kitchen table and talked for awhile over coffee and stale cake. By evening the coffee had turned to beer—cheap beer that Keltie swigged under the kitchen’s yellow light as her mom heated a pot of goulash for supper. A smell of tomatoes and macaroni wafted from the stove, awakening an appetite Keltie had not felt since the previous spring. Drunk or no, Chloe Burke knew how to cook. The beer would not sit alone in anyone’s stomach tonight.

“Not bad,” Keltie said, breathing in deep the warm aroma.

“What are you babbling about?” her mom called.

“The trailer. It looks terrible from the outside, I can’t lie about that, but you’re doing what you can with the inside.”

“Have another beer, girl. I’ll get you drunk enough to see the Taj Mahal yet.”

Not feeling the least bit objectionable to this command, Keltie popped the top on a fresh can. But she wasn’t far gone enough yet for the compliment to be anything less than genuine. Chloe had the trailer looking neat as a pin. The counters were clean, the floors polished. Ceramic figures—elephants, dogs—sat atop a tea chest organized on the inside with meticulous care. The living room looked cultivated in much the same way, with its vacuumed carpet and pretty throw pillows.

“Better than not bad,” Keltie nodded.

A plate of goulash that smelled damned near perfect was placed in front of her.

“I was always good at keeping house,” Chloe said, taking the chair opposite. “Not much good at anything else, but at least that.”

“Cooking, Mom. Don’t forget cooking.”

As if to prove her point, Keltie forked a helping into her mouth and began to chew. “Oh wow. Great as I remember.”

“I’m glad you came by. You can help me give out candy to the kids tonight.”

She swallowed. “Is it trick-or-treat already?”

“It is. Happy Halloween, Keltie.”

“Boy, is that ever a good lead-in for the story I want to tell you.”

The older woman stared at her. “Is it about your friend? Penelope?”

“Yes.”

The story did not come out well. Like everyone else, Keltie’s mom believed what she read in the papers: A homeless lunatic had been bedding down in the Showboat, had come across two girls who were in a storage room to fetch extra napkins, and attacked them. Just like her trailer, it looked neat as a pin.

So why hasn’t it worked for me? Keltie kept wondering, though the answer was simple enough. Homeless lunatics, no matter how desperate, were incapable of biting off human heads from their necks. That kind of shit was for Amazonian pythons.

“You were in shock,” Chloe said, pouring a fourth beer into her glass. “You saw your best friend get murdered and now your memory is playing parlor tricks.”

“That’s what my shrink keeps saying,” Keltie replied.

“Well he’s right. I once woke up on the floor after an all night drinking binge convinced a dog had been outside my window, talking to me in English.”

“Uh...wow. That’s heavy, Mom. Do you remember what it said?”

“Let me in.”

“Let me in? For real?”

The older woman made a face. “No, not for real. I just told you, the mind is a magician. A trickster.”

“If that’s true, then mine’s right up there on the ladder with David Copperfield. Because this memory I have is...crystal clear. Every time I close my eyes, I watch Penelope die.”

“She was your best friend,” Chloe reiterated.

They continued to drink steadily until dark...and then well after dark. At six-thirty the trick-or-treaters started to knock. That, for Keltie, was something of an oddity, for she had no memory later on of inviting them over. Colorful pictures of other incidents were unfortunately not as reluctant to expose themselves. She and her mom had answered the door drunk off their asses. Cries of *Merry Christmas* and *Happy Thanksgiving* spilled from their lips as they tossed chocolates in the general direction of whatever loot bag seemed close enough. Some of the kids swore at them. Others just shook their heads. Keltie dropped an empty beer can into one little vampire’s bag and got told to fuck off. Not long after that, she threw up on the front step.

“Oh, what a fucking night!” Chloe howled, sprawled on the living room floor near a puddle of her own vomit. “This is just a colossal fucking night!”

“I feel better,” Keltie said. “Is there any more beer?”

A cackle came from the old woman’s throat. “*Shit* yeah! With me there’s always more beer!”

At some point in the middle of the night, Keltie woke up under the kitchen table. With pounding head and aching back, she managed to crawl out. Ceiling lights and desk lamps, all of which had been left on, stabbed her eyes, making it hard to search for the nearest toilet. She needed to pee; she needed to puke. Then she needed to pass out again for maybe the next twenty years.

Daylight found her lying face down inside the shower, naked as a Playboy centerfold. Shivering, she hauled herself up to a seated position. Seconds later the curtain was dragged back. There stood Chloe, holding a glass of water in one hand and four aspirin in the other.

“Breakfast’s on the table,” she said. “Make sure you eat it right away after taking these.”

“My head,” Keltie moaned.

“Take the aspirin. Then eat. You’ll be fine.”

Fine was probably not the right word, but by twelve noon her headache had gone, and all the empty cans had been swept from the floor.

“Congratulations,” Chloe told her with a twinkling smile. “You survived.”

Keltie tossed one final can into the garbage bag and smiled back. “You say that like I’ve never been drunk before.”

“That’s because you haven’t.”

“Please,” Keltie said, trying to sound exasperated. “How would you know?”

“Because I’ve been dancing with the devil since I was your age. I know.”

Her mother’s smooth composure lasted exactly two more hours. By that time, Keltie needed to leave. The detention center expected her back in her room before dark. Chloe did not react to this news right away. She waited until the soap opera they were watching went to commercial, then stood up to pour them each a third cup of coffee.

“You could stay,” she said casually from the steaming decanter. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“I have classes.”

"You've never worn glasses."

Keltie's mug was placed on the table by a woman whose face had gone empty as the ruins of an old church.

"Classes, Mom," Keltie told her. "I have classes. School."

"Yes."

"Plus a room I'm supposed to sleep in every night. The sentencing—"

Chloe waved the words off. "Yes, yes. You stole a car. You got arrested. Your parents were deemed unworthy. I've got the whole sordid tale memorized."

"Then you know I can't stay. And I didn't steal that car," she added, keeping her tone delicate.

On the TV, two men were arguing over whether not to expose their homosexual relationship. "Everyone knows we're gay already," one of them pointed out. "Yeah, but not *flaming*," the other said, "we're just sort of having a bromance." "Okay," the first man said, "now I'm hurt. I mean really hurt." "I'm sorry."

Chloe sat down. Her eyes were not on the soap opera, or anything else in particular. Keltie thought it more likely they were seeing something that never was, and never would be.

"What we did last night," she began, then stopped. Keltie gave her time to sort it all out. She sipped her coffee, waited. "It was fun. I had a good time."

"I don't really remember if it was fun," Keltie had to admit.

"I do." Suddenly Chloe looked at her, and a tear rolled down her cheek. "But when I'm alone, it's different. I drink until I fall down. And when I wake up my head hurts and my stomach hurts. And there's nobody here. I'm alone. Always alone, until this morning."

"Don't drink anymore, Mom. Give it up."

A laugh came from the other side of the table. "It isn't a light switch, dear."

"I know that. But you could get help."

"I got help last night. From my daughter."

"Bruce," the man on TV said, "we slept together once. *Once*. Everyone experiments." "You're breaking my heart," Bruce said.

"That isn't something I could turn into a habit," Keltie came out with, feeling bemused. "Anyway, I don't think it helped you at all."

Chloe shook her head. "You're wrong. It made me happy. For the first time since I don't know when."

"Come visit me at the DC, Mom. They allow for that every week."

"But they don't let you out."

"Not very often."

"Bruce?" the TV man said. "Look at me. Look." Wiping away tears, Bruce looked. "Good boy. There are repercussions for who we are. What we are. But that doesn't mean we'll never be happy."

Within the hour Keltie was ready to leave. Not a word came from Chloe while she put on some makeup and found her shoes. Feeling let off the hook, Keltie made several cheery comments about seeing her mother again on visitors day.

They went to the front door. Through the window Keltie saw rusty cars parked beneath dead trees. Crumpled flowers. A bicycle with a broken chain. She opened the door, stepped outside.

"Keltie?"

Her mom stood just inside the trailer, a woman with dry, gray hair and sunken stones for eyes. It was yesterday all over again, or almost.

“Twelve hours from now I’m going to wake up in the dark,” Chloe said. “And I’m going to look for you, and you’re not going to be here.”

“Mom.”

“And I’m going to be so sad.”

“Mom, *stop*.”

Chloe stopped. Or rather, her mouth did, while her eyes continued to plead for more time, time that Keltie, even if she wanted to, could not spare. All she could do was remind her mother about visitors day and then keep her fingers crossed the old woman wouldn’t show up drunk on the DC’s front porch.

To judge by what happened next, she would need to cross her toes, too. Chloe burst into the most wretched tears the world had ever seen. She came onto the step and hugged Keltie, begging her not to go. Keltie took a step back, which did no good whatsoever. The railing bent with their combined weight, almost pitching them onto the gravel.

“Mom, you’re making a scene!” Keltie hissed.

“This is Sunset Lane!” the other sobbed. “There’s no such thing as a scene!”

Keltie glanced once again at the mess behind her and thought that this was probably true. A fat guy in boxer shorts had come out of trailer number eight, scratching his balls, but he wasn’t looking back.

“Nobody cares, Keltie! Nobody cares about anything!”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Please stay with me!”

It took an hour to calm her down. They had to go back inside, sit down, drink more coffee. At four o’clock a woman from the DC’s office called, wanting to know where the hell their girl was at. Keltie explained her situation as best she could. The woman gave her until dark to have her butt back where it belonged; otherwise, she would make another phone call, direct to the Norwalk Police Department.

Please, Keltie thought as she hung up, please, somebody, somewhere, let my visit with Dad go better than this one.

At the kitchen table, Chloe began to wail all over again.

Four: Visiting Dad

The first week of November brought rain. Keltie heard it start in the middle of the night, not long after her disastrous exit from Sunset Lane, as a single, innocent drop on the window. She watched it trickle down, her mind blank. Then the streetlight on Benedict Avenue turned misty. Seconds later, it seemed like the whole world was going to drown.

That was the start of it. The wet month. The cold month, the crazy month. The month that changed Keltie's life for the second time in less than a year. And as far as she knew, she'd been the only person awake in the building to see it.

Classes that week were drab and dull as the scenery outside. Girls slouched at their desks, chewing bubble gum, while the teachers droned away about world history, English, math. Even the science teacher acted too depressed to raise his voice above the maddening *drip, drip, drip* of the leaky ceiling.

"Miss Burke," he called out on Wednesday, in the middle of a lecture about the solar system. "How many rings does Jupiter have?"

Goddamn, she thought.

Drip, drip, drip. The bucket in the corner was almost full.

"Miss Burke? The rings?"

"I don't know, Mr. Agee," she confessed.

He did not look pleased. "Why don't you know, Miss Burke?"

"Because I've never been to Jupiter."

Laughter from the other girls, but Mr. Agee only shook his head. "Take a wild guess," he said. "Let's see if you're psychic."

Keltie gave him a shrug. "Seventeen."

"A *swinnngggg* and a miss!" the teacher bellowed—or would have bellowed, had the weather been sunny. "The answer is four. There is the halo ring, the main ring, and two gossamer rings."

Keltie picked up her pencil and pretended to write this down. *Fuck Jupiter and its fucking rings*, she wrote.

The end of the week found her once again on Benedict Avenue, this time to visit her father. The skies were still gray, the rain still falling. Keltie reached Norwalk's downtown area beneath an umbrella. The street dipped into an area known to locals as the flats. This was a depressing place no matter what time of year. There were a couple of bars, a couple of law offices. A veterinary clinic, an insurance agency. Cars bumped over a broken railroad crossing easier to ignore than repair.

At the top of the hill was West Main Street. Keltie knew it well—far better than she did Jefferson Street. Empty shop windows gaped at sidewalks devoid of people. Signs that read *Closed* and *Going out of Business* leaned on naked mannequins. A red light over the intersection switched to green.

Keltie turned left. She was almost at her destination. She could even see it—a church tower, looming over the business blocks, the maple trees. It stood at the edge of West Main's residential district. As Keltie walked, houses old as the Civil War began to brood on wet lawns. Their windows, like the ones downtown, were all huge and dark. Nothing stirred at the curtains, but Keltie knew better, or thought she did. These were haunted places. Filled with gray ghosts from a dead time period. Strange knocking noises, antique furniture. Doors that

closed by themselves.

The First United Methodist Church may have been haunted, too. Its age—a stone carving near the entrance proclaimed it had been built in 1903—certainly favored the possibility, as did the magnificent archways, three of them, that let on a shadowy porch big enough to park a truck on.

Tucking her umbrella under her coat, Keltie mounted the porch. A candle flickered through a huge wooden door. Stepping inside, Keltie found herself in the church's nave. It was empty at this time of day, and all the more quiet for the fact. Candles glowed everywhere, providing just enough light to see. A sensation of immense emptiness hovered all around. For a moment Keltie imagined floating on a rowboat in the middle of an ocean.

"Good afternoon," a cultured, male voice spoke from the shadows. "May I help you, Miss?"

Keltie's eyes followed the sound to the altar, where a bald-headed priest with glasses was smiling politely.

"Hello," she said. The priest raised his brows. *Too loud, Miss*, his face seemed to say. *You're at a place of worship, not a rock concert.* "Hello," she whispered. "My name is Keltie Burke. Do you have a Cameron Burke working here?"

The priest's head tilted the tiniest bit. "Indeed we do," he told her. "Mr. Burke is our custodian. Are you a relative of his?"

No, Keltie thought, *we just happen to have the same last name by pure coincidence. The Lord works in mysterious ways.*

"He's my dad," she replied.

"I see. Come this way, please."

He led her out of the spooky nave—thank goodness—to a well-lit hallway lined with church offices. Computer keyboards clacked away behind glass doors with names stenciled on them. Internet junkies pretending to work. Keltie caught a glimpse of solitaire on one screen, a girl's bare boobs on another.

The priest turned right. Here a flight of steps took them down to a newer section of the church, where a long, carpeted hallway stretched between doors decorated with cute Thanksgiving pictures: giggling pilgrims, gobbling turkeys.

"Bible studies wing," the robed man said over his shoulder, as if suggesting Keltie needed to enroll immediately. "The children meet every Tuesday and Friday night."

"Cool," Keltie remarked.

They went down a second flight of steps—this one much narrower than the first—that made Keltie's stomach begin to flutter with unease. She knew, even before they reached the bottom, that her dad was working in the church basement today.

The hallway at the bottom was only a little wider than the stairs. The priest walked quietly (was there any other way for them to walk?), never saying a word, never so much as turning his head to check if she were still there.

"File room," he said at last, stopping in front of a plain door. "I believe your father is working in here today."

He opened the door on a room full of metal cabinets. A stack of yellow folders lay on a table to the right. To the left was an abominable beast of a photocopier that looked ready to eat whatever came close to it. Keltie thought it may have last been used during the Carter administration.

"Mr. Burke?" the priest called out.

No one answered, but that was okay. Keltie could see her father just fine now. Straight ahead, half-hidden between two of the cabinets, he sat asleep on the floor, with one arm

inside of a mop bucket and the other on a dustpan.

"Wake the fuck up!" the priest bellowed. *"You shitty old man! There's someone here to see you!"*

Keltie rolled her eyes. Yes, that was probably what the priest *should* have said, anyway. In a worse world, in a better world, or whatever. Every time Keltie fell asleep in class the teacher would whack her desk with a ruler. Clearly, someone needed to do the same for Cameron Burke.

"Mr. Burke?" the priest put forth, his voice barely louder than what it had been upstairs. "Mr. Burke?"

A stocky man in a blue jumpsuit opened his eyes. He blinked for a moment, then jerked his hand from the bucket. Dirty water splashed onto a scribbled mess of salt and pepper hair that hung over a low forehead.

"Oh shit!" he cried. "I mean oh darn! Darn."

The dustpan skidded off as he leapt to his feet, so it did not catch the dirt he brushed, with frantic hands, from his jumpsuit.

"Father McQuillan. I was just on my break."

"So I assumed," the priest replied.

Cameron's eyes fell on Keltie.

And froze. Saying nothing, Keltie put her hands on her hips. It had been over two years since she'd last looked at this man—this tall man with crazy hair and muscles too big for the brain that moved them. She'd gone out the front door on some snowy Tuesday morning, a suitcase under each arm. The detention center on Benedict Avenue, her new home, awaited. *Goodbye, Dad*, she'd said. But of course he had not answered. Sitting at the kitchen table, he had continued watching the little black and white TV that hardly ever got turned off. He had not answered. Today, like it or no, he was going to talk to her. And he was going to go first.

What will he say? she wondered. Something deep, to be certain. Something monumental. It had been so long since they'd seen each other. Keltie braced herself. Cameron Burke didn't harbor many words of wisdom, but when he got lucky, oh! When he got lucky he could sound like Robert Browning.

Tentatively, she offered him a tiny wave, a tiny smile. No words, though. No way, not yet. She wanted to hear him get lucky first.

Cameron blinked, shook his head, and said: "Holy shit and fried eggs for breakfast. Keltie. You're here."

Father McQuillan went back upstairs, leaving them to catch up on lost time. Keltie took off her coat. Beneath was something like her usual attire: V-necked polo shirt, denim skirt with studded belt, boots. Meanwhile Cameron cast several skittish glances at her, squeezing water from the mop once, twice, three times.

"Did you forget I was coming?" she asked. "The detention center arranged it. Or so I thought."

"I didn't forget," he said.

"You look so surprised."

He glanced at her again—but again, only for a moment. His eyes searched for a place to rest, bouncing all over the room like one of those rubber ten cent superballs.

"I got caught sleeping," he explained.

"Was that the first time?"

"No. I mean yes. It was."

Keltie grinned. "Liar, liar, pants on fire."

The eyes stopped, and at last Cameron smiled a little. "Oh, very mature. You're growing up so fast."

"It's not mine. I think Robert Frost wrote it."

"So what should we talk about first, Keltie?" he asked, suddenly grave.

It sobered his girl up in a hurry. "I don't know. I was hoping you could break the ice."

"You had a bad spring this year."

"Understatement, Dad. Understatement."

The other nodded. "My apologies. Think you can talk about it?"

"I guess. I already told Mom."

"And what did she say?"

She filled him in as he walked her down to the janitor's office, a pathetic little room not much larger than a closet. A box of glass cleaner rested on a small, wobbly desk. A Cleveland Indians calendar dangled by a shred of tape from a dirty mirror.

"You haven't seen anyone get their head bitten off since that time your mother spilled beer all over our computer." Cameron looked at her from behind the desk. "Remember that?"

"Yes," Keltie said, wishing he'd not brought the incident up. Mom's lip had been fat for three days afterward. "So you think I imagined it? Just like everyone else."

"Don't feel embarrassed, Keltie. If I saw a maniac kill my best friend, I'd be imagining all kinds of funky shit to explain how it happened."

She laughed at his choice of words. "Not too many people talk like that anymore, Dad."

"Like what?"

"'Funky shit'. You sound like Greg Brady coming home from a Pink Floyd concert."

"Really?" he said, putting the glass cleaner up on a shelf. "I think I heard someone say it on American Movie Classics the other night."

"See?" Keltie pounced, vindicated. "Old school, man."

Cameron sat down, grabbed a pencil from the desk drawer and started going over what looked like a check-list of cleaning supplies. "So how's your mom?" he wondered, without looking up.

"The same."

"You mean drunk?"

"Yes. You've only been divorced a year, Dad."

"And what about school? Things going okay there?"

He was still studying the check-list, though the pencil hadn't moved off the top item. It made Keltie grimace. Either the old man didn't know what the fuck he was doing, or he just wanted to go through the motions of pretending to care for her grades. Whichever, it was clear to Keltie his posture represented a charade. But why?

"I don't think the teachers know much," she told him.

"Spoken like a true teenager."

"Dad, our history teacher was talking about the Texas Revolution. He said there was a popular fort that got taken by the Mexicans, but he couldn't remember the name of the fort."

"But are you passing all of your courses?"

She gave a nod that he didn't see. "Yes."

"Good." Cameron dropped the pencil into a coffee mug. "Sit down, Keltie. I have an extra seat."

She pulled a plastic stool out from the corner and put her butt on it. She then asked him

about work. Was it really so dull that he needed to steal cat naps? Not usually, he insisted. In fact most of the time he was behind schedule. Did she know that janitors not only had to mop and wax, but keep track of chemical orders as well? His hand gestured towards the glass cleaner as he spoke, as if this were all the proof required.

"They expect a lot," he went on, his eyes blinking. "And it's not like I'm Hong Kong Phooey, or whoever the hell passes for him these days. I'm just an old guy trying to keep his shit together."

"It's all right, Dad. I wasn't trying to upset you."

"I'm not upset."

"You sound upset."

His fist pounded the desk, making Keltie jump. "I'm *not* upset! Well...shit. Now I am."

"Sorry."

"Don't say that to me. You don't owe me any more apologies."

Now it was Keltie who began to blink. The old man's tone of voice had always covered a wide range of emotions, albeit most of them could be traced back to the doorstep of his strongest: anger. Contrition, on the other hand, had never so much as stood on a welcome mat. Until today.

"Did I use to apologize a lot?" she chanced.

And immediately regretted it. She watched Cameron's eyes squeeze shut as if he'd been stabbed with a kitchen knife. Behind them there doubtless swarmed a hive of painful memories Keltie had not intended to stir up. Yellings, cursings, beatings. Once, when she was ten, he punched her in the stomach hard enough to make her vomit the meal she'd just eaten, then had shoved her onto the floor for vomiting. She'd also gone to bed with headaches a lot, none of them caused by too much studying at school.

"I'll go," she said presently. "Maybe we can try again next month—"

Cameron leaped to his feet, banging the back of his chair against the wall. "No!" he all but yelled. "No. I'm taking you to dinner. How does Berry's sound?"

Keltie smiled. "I still love their chicken burgers."

"Then let's eat."

They walked back downtown on drying streets (the rain had stopped) to a restaurant that hadn't changed much since Keltie'd last been inside. Red leather booths lined walls decorated with pictures of black and white photos from Norwalk's bygone era. A regulator clock ticked over one booth; a badge from Fisher Body hung over another. Diners—most of them old—chatted over half-clean plates in the dim lounge.

Keltie chose a booth on the left side, above which hung a picture of one of West Main Street's most famous mansions: Number 114. It had been built during the Greek revival era of the early 1800s and was absolutely huge. A grizzled old waitress dropped by with menus for both of them. Keltie went straight to the chicken burger with fries and a Coke.

"This your date for the night, Cameron?" the waitress asked.

"She's my daughter."

Keltie saw the waitress' eyes light up. "The one you're always telling me about? Carrie?"

"Keltie."

The waitress smiled and patted Keltie's shoulder. "Your papa loves you, dear."

"I'll have the same thing she's having," Cameron said tightly.

"Do you?" Keltie asked, once they were alone.

And the way he blushed when he answered was so cute. "May's been working here a long

time," he said. "Discretion isn't really one of her virtues."

"Do you love me, Dad?" she asked again.

But again he dodged the question, this time with one of his own. "Why is love always so easy for girls to talk about?"

"Because it's pure. It's good. It's the best thing we have."

"It never sounds that way when I talk about it."

"You're letting it make you uncomfortable. Don't."

May came back with two glasses of water, then disappeared again. It gave Cameron time to change the subject.

"So when's your birthday?" he wanted to know. "December, right?"

"The sixteenth, yes. I'll be sixteen," she added, as if this were some magical coincidence.

"I can't believe it," Cameron said. "You're gonna be driving next year."

"Not if the detention center has anything to say about it. I won't be allowed to get a license until I'm eighteen."

The food came. They dug in, occasionally touching upon other mundane topics of conversation. Cameron asked if she smoked; Keltie answered him with the bald truth. He asked if she had a boyfriend. No, that department was clear for the time being. This seemed to relieve the tension in his shoulders somewhat. He slouched back in his seat, and when May came by again he asked her for coffee.

"What about the detention center?" he put forth next.

Keltie slurped her Coke. "What about it?"

"Are you happy there?"

"I'm not sure anyone's happy there, Dad. It's not a place for happy kids."

Just then a table on the other side of the room erupted into a song of *Happy Birthday*. Keltie looked over her shoulder to see a crowd of people gathered around tin foil balloons filled with helium. In the middle of it all was a girl who looked to be about ten years old, a smile glittering on her face. Keltie did not remember her tenth birthday; she did not remember any of them.

"You know, I sometimes hear these stories about reincarnation," Cameron said, whirling her back to their own table. "Stories that kids tell. They say that before they were born they stood in a giant room with all these grown up men and women. Daddies and Mommies. And they claim to have chosen the grown-ups they thought would make the best Daddy and Mommy for them." His head tilted. "You know?"

"I may have read stuff like that before," Keltie allowed. "Can't say I believed any of it, though."

"So you don't remember choosing?"

"Good Lord, no. I don't think anyone over the age of two remembers what it's like to be dead. If the stories are true."

Cameron let the odd conversation stop for a few minutes. The coffee came. Keltie watched him mix it just the way he always liked: cream only. The sugar packs lay unused on the plate.

"When the detention center first called me about letting you come visit I got scared," he said. "I almost turned them down."

"Oh?" Keltie replied, curious as to where this sudden turn might lead. "And what made you change your mind?"

"I'd like to tell you."

"So do it."

The man sitting across from her sighed. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because, Keltie. It never sounds pure and good when I talk about it. And I want it to. I *need* it to."

"Tell me, Dad," Keltie said, her tone delicate. "I'll believe you if you do." She raised her right hand. "Promise."

Noises from the restaurant—tingling silverware, muttering voices—filled the space Cameron let draw out between them. On his face was an expression that seemed to ask: *Why would you believe me, after all the things I did?*

Because this is a new you I'm seeing, Dad. I don't know where he comes from, but I'm glad he's here.

"A free strawberry sundae for the birthday girl," someone over Keltie's shoulder sang. "Free. Gratis. And on top of that, you don't have to pay for it." Laughter from the girl's table rose over the lounge. Cameron glanced at the celebrants, then looked back at Keltie.

And then he said it.

For the first time in maybe ten years, he said it.

Did it sound sincere? Pure and good? Keltie thought yes. Even now the old man's eyes were wet. A blink away from spilling tears. Yet their gaze remained steady. The party, the other diners, no longer tempted his humility. Shredded and raw, Cameron Burke was looking at his daughter, and awaiting judgment.

"I love you too, Dad," she told him. "Thank you."

Five: Death in Black and White

They returned to the church before parting ways. Evening had fallen. Stars glimmered over the maple trees, dodging in and out of smoky clouds rushing east on a chill autumn wind. Bunched in her coat, Keltie said goodbye to her dad, promising to visit again next month. Then, after one last hug and kiss on the cheek, she was walking home alone.

A spring accompanied her step. It had been absent for almost a year, and to have it back now surprised Keltie, almost as much as the way her gaze searched the sky as she walked, rather than her shoes, or how she twirled her folded umbrella, or the way the smile on her face shined almost as bright as the stars. But then surprises had been jumping from seemingly every corner today.

"Hey!" someone yelled as she was about to cross Hester Street.

Keltie looked left down a dirty, dismal little block that had been dirty and dismal for a long time. She saw a bar that had caught fire and closed years ago. She saw an abandoned truck dock. Nothing else.

"Can somebody help me, please?" the voice—a female's—called again. "I'm in real trouble here."

Keltie took a hesitant step in the caller's direction. "Where are you?" she sent out.

Please don't say you're in the truck dock.

"I'm in the truck dock. I think I broke my leg."

"Fuck," Keltie muttered. Then, to the female: "I'm sorry to hear that. But I don't think I can help you. I don't even have a cell phone."

The voice's owner seemed to find her pessimism irritating. "How on earth would you help me with a cell phone?"

"I could call an ambulance."

"I don't need an ambulance. Just come down and help me to my feet."

"Forget it," Keltie said. "You're on your own."

She started across the street, keeping an eye on the dock's opening lest the other woman, who was surely up to no good, decide to leap from the shadows and claim whatever prize she hoped have at Keltie's expense. And sure enough, something dark *did* leap. A woman with white skin and black hair, six feet tall at the very least, bounded out of the truck dock, then jumped onto the wall of the abandoned bar and climbed up to the roof.

Keltie's feet froze. Mouth gaping, she watched a piece of brick fall from the old bar and smash itself on the sidewalk. Something on the roof let out a cackle—the laugh of a madwoman.

"That leg didn't look broken to me!" Keltie shouted, before tearing off towards Benedict.

"There will be shattered bones tonight!" the woman called back from somewhere high above. "*Yours! All yours!*"

At that instant a gigantic piece of masonry fell through the fire escapes. Screaming, Keltie cut backwards, just as the stone hit the walk and exploded. Dirty shards more than a century old flew by her feet, banging off garbage cans and parking meters. One of them hit her boot. Keltie looked up.

And now the woman clung to the wall like a spider, grinning with long, white fangs.

She could think of nothing to do at this point but run across West Main Street, where she could duck inside Berry's and maybe order a chocolate soda to calm her nerves. Wondering where the fuck all the other people were in this town all of a sudden, she made a break for it.

"No help over there, little girl!" the woman shrieked.

A row of parked cars blocked Keltie's access to the opposite walk, but that was no trouble for a girl who gave gymnastics lessons at her school. She leaped onto the hood of a Toyota and had her feet back on the ground before the group of people coming out of Berry's could even look in her direction. They were three old men and two old women—whatever that might mean—and instead of walking away from the door, to give other customers access to the restaurant, they *stopped*. They stopped, chatted. One of them told a joke. All of them began to laugh. Yuk yuk yuk, high hilarity on the streets of Norwalk. An evening at the Improv is now in session.

"*What the fuck is so funny?*" Keltie screamed. "*You're blocking the door!*"

She ran next door without waiting for any of them to reply. Here she found windows lit up with plants and mannequins and antique rocking chairs. The Colonial Flower Shoppe, the word *shop* spelled with two *ps* because the owner was obviously very cool. Hip as a fucking black cat with Wayfarers.

"Keltie," a deep, cold voice said from the street. "Keltie Burke."

Standing next to the Toyota was a woman with long black hair that looked cold as February curtains. Keltie didn't want to look but felt powerless to stop. A pair of icy blue eyes glowered from a glacier white face. A long gown, also white, floated on the chill breeze.

"Don't make me chase you," the woman said, "or I will become angry and make it hurt all the more when I catch you."

"What do you want?" Keltie somehow managed to ask. The door to the flower shop was only ten feet off. She told herself to run inside, to disappear. Yet the woman's gaze was insistent. Too threatening to disobey.

"Your blood," came her simple, steady reply. "Your flesh. Your bones. One life for another."

Meanwhile the old men were still clapping each other on the back, saying their goodbyes. "Well, Bill, you have yourself a hell of a night," one of them said. "It's been good seeing you again. If I don't get home soon I'm gonna shit my Depends."

The ghostly white woman in the street paid them no mind. "Come here," she ordered, eyes unwavering.

The bell over the flower shop door dinged, breaking Keltie's paralysis. She bolted past a young man carrying roses and into the sweet-smelling confines of the shop. Here a virtual Tolkien forest attacked all five of her senses. She could barely get a grasp of what scratched, tickled, and bloomed at her from a number of giant pots on the floor and ceiling. Brushing a huge yellow sunflower out of her face, she saw a desk, behind which stood a woman whose expression was almost as frightening as the one in the street.

"Hey," Keltie said, glancing back once to make sure she'd not been followed.

The other woman made no reply. *From one crazy bitch to the next*, Keltie couldn't help but think.

"Are there any job openings here?" she spluttered out. Her chest was still heaving from the run, and she supposed the counterwoman thought a crazy person had come into her shop. Keltie was beginning to think she might be right.

"Stella?" the woman called up a small spiral staircase to the right. "Are we hiring right now?"

"No," an old lady's voice snapped back from up top.

Well, let's make that three bitches, girl. Three total bitches and you. What an evening.

Thanking the woman, Keltie darted past the counter and down a much more narrow aisle

that led to what she sincerely hoped was a back door out of this place. For once luck was with her. She found a door that let on a parking lot and, casting a pair of wide eyes in as many directions as possible, ran to an old building that faced the street parallel to West Main. Another back door showed its face here. Keltie yanked it open and found herself in what appeared to be a comic book shop. She screamed at a life-sized Spiderman figure clinging to the wall, which alerted a pimply-faced boy who'd been idling behind the cash register.

"Can I help you?" he asked, eyeing her fearfully.

"Spider-Man!" Keltie gasped.

The boy glanced at the figure for a moment. "What about him?"

"Why is he in here?"

"Because this is a comic book store. Heroes!" the boy then shrieked, making his lone visitor recoil. "Legends! The world will be saved by them all!"

Keltie shook her head slowly. "Not tonight. Lock the doors when I leave. Don't come out for at least thirty minutes."

With that, she walked out the front door, where a poster of Wonder Woman being attacked by a monster hung. The street beyond—Seminary Street—was blessedly quiet. Down left she could see Benedict Avenue, which led straight to the detention center. The valley she'd crossed earlier was well lit, and still busy with traffic at this hour. Would the lunatic woman with shark's teeth spot her if she tried to make the mile long trek back home?

"Hello!" the lunatic woman called down from the roof.

Question answered. Keltie ran across Seminary Street to a broken down apartment building that, according to its reputation, housed tenants who would probably eat a fifteen year-old girl for dessert if they saw one. She opened the door, looking back once to see the woman's white gown billow out as she floated to the ground. It was time, she thought, to re-evaluate everything she believed about monsters. Either that or go to the hospital and get a fucking CAT scan.

The apartment building presented her with a dingy flight of stairs leading up to a dingy hallway. Keltie took them two at a time. Indeed, the faster she got through this parolee-infested roach motel, the better. Up top, loud music brayed from behind doors with broken numbers. Cigarette butts lay everywhere underfoot. McDonald's wrappers. Weird stains.

"I'm gonna play with myself all night," a drunken voice sang from room 204, *"until I find me a girl who helps me play it right!"*

At opposite end of the hall was a second flight of steps. Keltie ran down them and out a door that dumped her into the parking lot of an abandoned mill. Here she stopped to catch her breath. To the left was a business block that cut her off from Benedict Avenue. Dead ahead, cloaked in shadows, were the train tracks she'd crossed earlier today, along with a bar where the worst people in Norwalk liked to hang out.

"Stop running, Keltie!" the woman's voice, rusty and dry, called from one of the many black windows overlooking the lot.

"Why should I?" she yelled back, suddenly angry at this beast, whatever it was, for spoiling what had tried hard to be a good day.

The windows were silent for several moments. Then, as if giving in to the truth for want of a suitable lie, the woman said: "Because my boss won't like it if I take too long to kill you! I'll get demoted! Again," she added, more softly.

"Oh, so I'm a sharpening post for the riff-raff tonight?" Keltie asked.

"Something like that, yes."

"Well now I feel scared, angry, *and* ridiculous. Thank you."

“You’re welcome. Ready to quit?”

“Not on your life!”

Fast as she could, Keltie took off towards the railroad tracks. If she could get across them to the bar, she could find safety amongst the throng of thieves, rapists, and so-so murderers who drank there.

The woman in white held no intention of surrendering her prey so easily, however. Keltie had barely cut half the distance to the bar when, gentle as a leaf, her huntress floated down to the tracks, toes balancing on the rails like a ballerina’s.

Without hesitating, Keltie cut left. The Benedict Avenue railroad crossing lay wide open in front of her, a clear shot. Even better, a black pick-up truck had slowed down to cross the tracks. Keltie vaulted quietly into the back of it and ducked down. The truck thumped over the crossing and sped up to climb the hill.

Seconds passed. Frozen against the truck’s steel bed, Keltie waited. Benedict Avenue leveled off; the driver, apparently oblivious to his new passenger, had reached the top of the hill. Naked November tree branches were now whisking through the sky. She was safe.

“Keltie, you dropped your umbrella!”

The woman’s head, all red eyes and black hair, appeared above her. A mouthful of scissor-blade teeth opened into a terrible grin before she swung the umbrella at Keltie’s face. Keltie rolled right and then left, avoiding blows hard enough to chip the truck’s clear-coat finish.

“Very good!” the woman mewed, pitching her purloined weapon over the side. “Wait till I tell my boss about your skills. He’ll probably pin a medal on me!”

The truck driver slammed on the brakes. Mouth hanging agog, Keltie watched the woman fly backward and smash her head through a sliding rear window. The driver’s side door opened, slammed shut. A middle-aged man in a CAT cap scowled down at Keltie for a moment before noticing that the other woman’s head was still stuck in the window.

“Oh Jesus Christ,” he said. Then, at Keltie: “Can you help me with her, please?”

Keltie jumped from the truck and ran down Benedict fast as she could.

“Bitch!” the man yelled.

It didn’t matter. Getting away from the woman in white was all that mattered. Despite all the broken glass, Keltie didn’t think she’d been seriously hurt. Dollars to donuts, she was already at work killing the driver. Well, let her. Let her kill whoever she wanted. Norwalk was a shit town, anyway. It needed a good purge.

She reached an intersection and decided to cross. Still in a panic from the truck ride, she ran in front of a car that almost killed her. Its tires screamed. The front bumper touched Keltie’s thigh. Someone yelled at her—*Jesus, lady, what the hell?* But fuck it. It didn’t kill her and that was the important thing. If a fanged monster that climbed buildings couldn’t do it then why should she worry about cars?

Her boot was on the curb at the other side of the street when she heard the monster call out again.

“Your friend is dead, little girl! Soon you will be, too!”

Keltie stopped. The monster had alluded to Penelope once tonight already—*one life for another*—but she’d been too caught up in the suddenness of its attack to pay it much mind. Now she turned her head to see the woman perched on the other side of Benedict, smiling for all the world like a killer whale closing in on a diver.

“One life for another,” Keltie said. “You’re right. I killed that freak at the Showboat for what it did to Penny. Maybe I should kill you for good measure.”

“Maybe you should,” the woman told her, grin intact. “Come to me and show us how.”

Keltie didn't move.

"Smart girl," the woman said, stepping forward. "You were lucky at the bay. We don't die easily. In fact, most of us live forever."

And that was when the Mack truck hit her. Keltie screamed when it happened, but no one heard. Later on, all anyone could remember for reporters at the Norwalk Reflector was the truck's blaring horn and skidding tires. And the body, of course. The people who got out of their cars to gawk, they remembered the body. A mangled pile of bones, a white dress covered in blood. The newspaper promised to release the identity of the victim once it became available. It never did.

Keltie made it back to the detention center without throwing up—a feat she grew rather proud of as the days progressed. She was wary of being attacked again, but save for a few battered Halloween decorations, nothing with teeth swooped amongst the trees. Even the detention center, huge though it was, appeared harmless. Most of its windows were lit up in warm gold, and she stepped into the front hall to find its wood furniture recently polished. A scent of pine hovered in the air, as did the smile of Mrs. Cobb, who was working the reception desk tonight.

"Keltie!" she beamed from a pair of bifocals. "How was your visit?"

"Cool," Keltie said flatly. "My dad was cool."

"Really? You always talked about him like you were afraid."

"There's lots worse things to be afraid of these days."

The other offered up a sage nod. "Indeed. Would you mind watching the desk for a few minutes while I use the restroom?"

"Not at all."

Humming some unknown tune from her youth, Mrs. Cobb scuttled off. Her chair behind the desk looked inviting, but before Keltie could sit down the phone rang.

She picked up the receiver. "Maple City Youth Home."

"You're dead."

The breath in Keltie's chest caught for a moment. She glanced over her shoulder, where a long, silent hallway courted many shadows. No one was there, of course. Nor was there anyone hiding atop of the large, black staircase that led to the bedrooms. No one at all.

"Keltie," the ominous voice on the line said. "I know you can hear me."

"I can hear you," she managed. "Please leave me alone."

"Do you know who this is?" the voice asked, ignoring the plea.

Its tone suggested the answer should be obvious. Was it? Indeed, Keltie thought she recognized the deep, suave masculinity, the musky intonation. The confidence. Where had she heard it before?

"Think, girl," the voice demanded.

"It's a little hard to do that with people always threatening to kill me."

"It'll come. You work well under pressure."

Keltie spared a look at the bathroom door, which was still closed. "That's one hell of a piss you're having in there, Cobb."

"What?" the voice asked.

"Never mind. I wasn't talking to you." And then, like a tidal wave, the answer flooded her memory. "*Bolt*. Your name's Bolt. Like the dog."

A puff of infuriated air came through the line. "Everyone who's joked about that to me is dead. But you're right. This is indeed Bolt. We met at Lyon's Park a few months ago."

"Yes. As I recall, you don't care for smokers very much. Guess that means you can

scratch me out of your little black book.”

“I’m afraid not. Two of my minions are dead because of you.”

“Minions?” Keltie asked. “What are you people? Some kind of devil’s cult? A satanic shoal?”

“I didn’t call to tell you who we are, Keltie,” Bolt replied. “I called to tell you that your luck has run out. You’re going to die for what you did in Sandusky. For what you did tonight, you’re going to die slowly.”

“Penelope was my friend,” Keltie said through gritted teeth. “I’d known her since the second grade. So no matter what happens, I’m *glad* I killed that skin-headed troll. And your wicked witch.”

“Slowly, Keltie,” Bolt repeated. “I’m going to toy with you like a cat. Do you hear me? A *cat!*”

She heard a thump near the window and looked up.

“Shit,” Bolt muttered. “Wait.”

Footsteps followed. They came up close to the window, then faded.

“All right,” Bolt told her. “I’m going to toy with you like a cat. A *cat!*”

This time the glass shattered as something flew into the front hall. Screaming, Keltie dropped the receiver, which finally brought Mrs. Cobb from the restroom.

“My goodness, what was that?” she huffed.

Keltie looked down at the mess shimmering on the floor. It led to what looked like the back of a doll’s head lying beneath an empty trophy shelf. Both women walked to it slowly. A lump of dark hair, matted with blood, waited for someone to kick it over.

“What is it?” Mrs. Cobb whispered.

Understanding came to Keltie, but it wasn’t like before, when she recognized Bolt’s voice. This came much more slowly. An ear pointed at the ceiling, ragged, gnawed from many adventurous confrontations in midnight back yards. Small, sharp teeth gleamed. A yellow eye gaped at nothing.

“Meow-Meow,” Keltie said. “It’s Meow-Meow.”

“Our cat?” the older woman’s unsteady voice replied.

“Yeah.”

“But what happened to her?”

“Somebody chopped off her head.”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

The scream from Mrs. Cobb made Keltie jump high as a bean. Then she was racing back towards the bathroom. The door opened, slammed shut. Wretched puking sounds followed.

“You’d better believe it, old woman,” Keltie said, nodding. “You’d better believe it.”

And all at once she felt like throwing up, too.

Six: Woman in the Room

"Today is Thursday," the English teacher said, "December the first. Two thousand sixteen. Christmas is coming." He eyed the class through a pair of gold spectacles, his middle-aged face challenging anyone to contradict this proclamation. When no one did, he went ahead and asserted himself anyway. "Yes," he told everyone, "it is. Think about that. Let it sink in."

A girl two desks over from Keltie raised her hand. "I need to pee."

The teacher turned around and wrote *pee* on the blackboard in florid letters. "Pee," he said, pointing his piece of chalk at the girl. "Miss Reyes, please use the word *pee* in a sentence that pertains in some way to Christmas."

"On Christmas Eve night I needed to pee."

"You can do better than that. Come on, let's have some imagination."

Everyone turned to look at the girl. Keltie remembered that her name was Amanda. They'd once shared a cigarette in the boiler room.

The teacher leaned forward. "Well?"

"Christmas is a time to see," Amanda intoned, "the many things there are to see. Presents underneath the tree. *The Holly and the Ivy*. But on this Christmas I badly need, a place that I can have a pee. So please, Mr. Thomas, I beg of thee, let me go and make it be."

With that, the girl stood and walked out of the room.

"Egad," Mr. Thomas said after several moments of stunned silence. "I knew if I kept at you girls it would pay off. Let's give her an ovation when she returns, shall we?"

When Amanda returned, everyone stood up. Then the ovation commenced. Blushing and waving, their newfound poetess stood through it all. When it was over, she gave a deep curtsy. This allowed Keltie to see past her shoulder to a house with a large lawn across the street. Standing underneath one of the trees, all but hidden in shadow, was the biggest dog she had ever laid eyes on. The dog looked hunched, as if preparing to strike. Its eyes were yellow. And they were looking straight at her.

Or maybe they weren't. The dog was only one of the creepy things Keltie noticed—or thought she noticed—since the night of Bolt's phone call. His talk of slow torture had put her imagination on high alert. Nothing felt safe anymore. Nowhere felt right. She had taken to eating her mashed potatoes with a fork and her carrots with a spoon. She drank coffee in a glass, cola in a mug. Her eye shadow had gone from purple to black. Books—all of them—she now read in reverse, starting with the climax and working her way back to the innocence of its characters. Cigarettes she still smoked, only now her habit was up to almost two packs a week. And at the end of November, she'd fallen off the gym's balance beam twice. Shit was getting real.

On her birthday—December sixteenth—Cameron came to visit. He bore gifts.

"Guess what it is," he said, smiling over a plate of ice cream in the cafeteria.

Keltie looked at the package. It was about the size of a Tupperware box, wrapped by hands which lacked experience with such tasks. Twisted gnarls of tape jutted from the sides, and there were wrinkles everywhere.

"Keltie!" one of her classmates shouted from a group of girls at the next table. "Happy birthday, biyyatch!"

"Thank you!" she sang back.

"What are you doing for Christmas?"

Giving Santa Claus a blowjob for an iPhone 7, she thought with a smirk but did not say.

"I'm not sure yet."

The girl then winked and made a circle with her thumb and index finger, which Keltie immediately understood. On Christmas Eve night, somewhere in the building, there would be a party—a secret party that hopefully involved a number of boys from the other wing. Later on, Keltie would be told where, and at what time.

"Biyyatch?" Cameron was saying. "Is that a nickname?"

Keltie laughed. "It's just a word that girls like to use."

"Oh. Oh!" Her dad's eyes came alive with understanding. "You mean for *bitch*!"

Everyone in the cafeteria stopped and looked at them.

"Bitch!" Cameron said again, utterly oblivious. "Of course!"

"Dad! Chill!"

"Sorry, sorry." And upon discovering he had become the room's center of attention, Cameron gave a meek wave to the audience. "It's cool," he told them. "She's not really a bitch."

"Dad!" Keltie hissed.

"I mean she's a *cool* bitch, not like...a *bitch* bitch."

"Dad, you are *not* making the situation any better."

"Well I don't know how to talk to kids these days," Cameron tried to explain. He looked around the cafeteria, waiting for it to get back to business. When it did, he told Keltie: "At my old school we said things like tope, bip, face."

"We're not complicated," Keltie said, "you just need to get out of that church basement—wait a minute." She stopped. "Tope, bip, face? What the hell do those words even mean?"

"Never mind. Open your present. I can see you're dying with anticipation."

She ripped open the package. It wasn't a Tupperware container, but a shoebox. Inside was a pair of pink sneakers with red laces, ready for running.

"Wow," she gasped. "Double wow. These are Nikes."

"You don't need to walk from here to my house or the church in boots," Cameron said. "On days that I can't come and pick you up, at least." A demure shrug twitched his shoulders. "You know."

"These are great, Dad. I love them. Do you mind if I give you a hug?"

"Of course not."

Keltie leaned over the table. Some of the ice cream got on her blouse. That was all right. Better than all right, because Keltie let the stain set, so she could look at it for the rest of the day and have a reason to smile.

Christmas came on a Sunday that year. On Saturday night the detention center held its annual DC Christmas Dance in the gymnasium, an event Keltie usually skipped on the grounds of too few good looking boys to dance with and cheap quality DJs who overindulged in bubblegum pop. This year her snobbery begged to be put on hold. She was already spending myriad nights alone in her room, staring out at shadows in the streets. And as it so happened, the first snow of the year fell on that Saturday, accompanied by an icy wind that rattled the old building's windows like fierce hands in search of a broken lock.

So at seven p.m. she put on a pink tank –top, red skirt, and some suitable makeup, then went downstairs to the dance. The hallways in the girls' wing had a tendency to look pretty at Christmastime, and this year was no exception. Wreaths hung on doorways powdered with fake snow. Lights twinkled on staircase railings, along which Keltie could already hear music from the gymnasium. She arrived to find a ten foot Christmas tree holding court over a noisy

room decorated heavily with silver tinsel and plastic spruce. Her shoes—the Nikes—skittered over a number of broken green needles. On the floor she could see a handful of girls she knew dancing with boys she didn't.

"Keltie my love! Have some punch!"

A glass was shoved into her hand by none other than Amanda Reyes. Keltie sipped it and grimaced. "Needs more sugar! What is this music?"

"I think it's Johnny Orlando!" Amanda shouted.

Speakers half the size of the tree had been set up in the corners. Keltie traced one of their cords back to a DJ with cheap sunglasses and hair almost as spiky as her own. Ah well, she thought. What more could you expect at a party where no one was allowed to get drunk?

"Found a date yet?" Amanda wanted to know.

"I just got here, actually! What's with all the pine needles?"

"They're going for a pagan look this year! And fuck it, why not? If God won't answer the phone we should stop dialing His number!"

"I guess so," Keltie agreed.

"Hey," Amanda said, leaning in towards Keltie's ear, "tonight. Midnight. Boiler room." She leaned back and winked. "Understood?"

"Loud and clear."

"Great! Now go find a dance partner!"

And before Keltie could inform her there was no way in hell she was going to dance, Amanda disappeared into the throng. By this time a few of the boys near the punch bowl had noticed the arrival of another girl. They stared over at Keltie with hopeful eyes. One smiled. Another waved. A third took a slow, cool drink of his punch, wretched, and spewed it out all over the other two.

"*Marty!*" the waver yelled. "*Jesus Christ!*"

"Sorry, man, but *god*, this stuff is awful!"

"Well spit it on yourself next time!"

Smiling, Keltie sauntered off to a row of wallflowers growing near the Christmas tree. A couple of other girls she vaguely knew said hello. Out on the dance floor, Amanda had found a tall, dark stranger to buff the polish with. It seemed that not only could she recite poetry on the fly, but knew some pretty good ways to shake her butt as well. A bittersweet memory came to Keltie just then. Penelope had known how to dance.

"Wanna dance?" a voice next to her asked.

She looked up to find a dark-skinned boy with a punch stain on his shirt. A pair of friendly black eyes looked back with only about half the confidence needed in order to ask a girl to dance. Clearly the boy was betting all of his tokens on the way Keltie had smiled after the spitting incident. So she was dealing with a gambler who didn't like flat punch. How dangerous could that possibly be?

"Marty, right?" Keltie asked, standing up.

His face, now that she hadn't bitten it off, relaxed a little. "Marty Calinga."

"Keltie Burke."

They took the floor. Slowly at first, feeling out the music—or what passed for it—with little knee bends and hip swings. Then Marty began to execute a number of modern street moves, which Keltie copied with relative ease. He was a full head taller than she, broad shouldered, with a complexion that alluded to the presence of Mexican or perhaps Spanish blood.

"Where did you say you were from?" she asked at one point.

"Right here in Norwalk," he answered, with a half dip that forced a tiny gasp into her lungs.

"But my grandparents come from the Philippines." He lifted her back up. "We went to grade school together."

"Really?" she let out, dizzied. "You and your grandparents?"

He laughed. "Me and you."

"Oh. I don't remember."

"No worries. I doubt our friends mingled much on the playground."

"Do you speak any Filipino?"

Marty paused for a moment, then nodded. "*Ng musikang ito ay kahila-hilakbot.*"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means come to the boiler room tonight at midnight. There's a secret shindig going down."

"Oh I'll be there," Keltie promised. "The girls already flashed me a few signals."

"Give me your room number and I'll pick you up."

Keltie went back upstairs at a little after eight. The weather by that time had gotten worse. Through a window at the end of the hall the world looked almost white, and a draft teased the curtains. She lingered at the glass nevertheless, watching the flakes fly. A lot of bad things had been said (and printed) about Norwalk's juvenile reform center over the years, but tonight, it and the surrounding neighborhood looked pretty. *Let the reporters come now*, she thought, eyeing a child's snowman across the street, *let them write anything they want, because it will all be good.*

Turning her back on the winter wonderland, Keltie went to her room. Most of the girls were still at the dance, so she would have the bathroom to herself for awhile, a fact which verged on the sublime. All the hot water she wanted would be hers for hours to come.

She finished her shower at nine and went back through the hall dressed in nothing but a towel. Even this she discarded after locking her door, content to stand naked in front of the closet until a proper blend of midnight attire came forth. Five minutes went by. Ten. Her choices seemed limited to two colors: red or black. Or red *and* black, as the case might be.

"Bah," she grunted. "Humbug."

Drowsy from the hot shower, she sat down on the bed, only to find the softness of the quilt too tempting to resist. In under five minutes it had her in its clutches, and by nine-thirty, Keltie was completely asleep.

"Merry Christmas!" someone sang from down the hall. "Ho-ho-ho to all you little angels out there! We love you!"

She awoke with a start two hours later, thinking she'd missed the party. But no. The Ben and Holly clock on the wall—a gift from Penelope last year—read eleven-thirty. Half an hour left, then. Half an hour to get dressed and put on some makeup.

"No way in hell am I going to make it on time," Keltie said to the empty room.

A titter from Penelope's old bed made her jump. Biting back a scream, she looked across to see a young woman with chalk white skin sitting on the mattress. Two deviously clever eyes gleamed behind a thin curtain of inky black hair. Bloody red lips formed a thoughtful smile. It was all Keltie needed to see.

"You're one of them," she said.

"But of course," the woman replied.

She remained seated as she spoke, prim and somehow pretty with her legs crossed and her palms on the sheets. Despite certain similarities, Keltie knew straight away that this wasn't the same woman who had attacked her last month. Last month's woman was dead, for

one thing. For another, the one sitting with her now did not look evil, though doubtless she intended Keltie harm. Rather, her face appeared highly amused, as if she pitied Keltie for some ridiculous skeleton she'd found living in her closet. Or maybe she thought it funny that the quilt had slipped to expose Keltie's breasts.

"Did Bolt send you?" was the next thing she wanted to know.

The woman offered a tiny tilt of her head. *Indeed*, the tilt seemed to say, *how very astute of you*.

"And now you're going to eat me." This last wasn't even a question. Throughout her life, Keltie had developed a habit of pouncing on worst case scenarios, but even the most optimistic of fools would have a hard go at the sunny side of the street from here.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, with genuine pity. "When my master tells me to do something..." she trailed off with a shrug. "You know."

Keltie pressed her back tighter against the wall, wishing like hell there were some way to break through it. Her breasts, still fully exposed, began to rise and fall with what were probably the final breaths of her life. "Why?" she asked, close to tears. "Why me?"

"You've been under Bolt's skin since last spring. And then as I understand it you mouthed off to him on the telephone. Something about being happy for killing two of our clan."

"What about my friend?"

"What about her?"

"She died, too."

"We don't care about that," the woman explained. "When someone takes from us, we take back." She blinked at Keltie for a few moments, showing no signs of being in any particular hurry. A gust of wind hit the window. "You don't remember me, do you?" she said at last. "We met once before."

"I can't imagine forgetting any of your kind."

The smile from Penelope's bed grew wider, showing a pair of sharp fangs. "You were playing truant. You bad girl."

"That doesn't narrow things down very much," Keltie said. Her eyes glanced left, then right, searching for something—anything—to use as a weapon of self defense. Not much looked helpful, aside from a small, Seven Habits of Successful People totem. Unfortunately, she'd flunked out of that course before they'd gotten around to beating monsters to death over the head.

"You bad girl," the woman said again...and stood up.

Keltie grabbed the totem and threw it. Her skills on the balance beam did not translate well to a good pitching arm, however; the shot went well wide, knocking over a silver candlestick.

"Please! Please no!"

Closer and closer the woman glided. Her arms had grown down to the floor; long, ragged nails dragged through the piled carpet. Then a hand almost too quick to see rose up and grabbed Keltie around the neck. She gasped. Cold, bony fingers pressed her skin, twitched, pressed some more. At any moment they would squeeze to cut off Keltie's air for good.

"I'm sorry," the woman repeated. But the shine in her toothy smile did not apologize for a single thing. "Think of something happy, dear. A pleasant scene for retreating. And if that doesn't work, just scream as loud as you can. Drown the pain."

"D-Does it really hurt?" Keltie gibbered.

"Lots, I'm afraid."

A knock at the door stopped everything cold. Keltie's breath let out in a whoosh. Then a voice from the hall called her name. "Can I come in?" it asked.

Without even thinking, Keltie screamed the word *YES!* The door came open to reveal Marty, whose eyes all but popped from his head at the sight they found. “Oh fuck,” he breathed out, frozen on the threshold. “Oh fuck...oh fuck.”

“Well hello,” the woman told him cheerfully. “Are you here to rescue our fair damsel yet again?”

“Let her go, Vera,” Marty said. “You’re not going to hurt her. Keltie?” His shocked gaze moved from tormentor to victim. “Relax. It’s all right.”

“Now that,” Keltie replied, “has got to be the most singularly stupid statement I’ve ever heard in my whole life.”

“Trust me.”

“Sure. No problem.”

Her tone dripped with sarcasm, yet what happened next was nothing short of astounding. The woman released her grip, allowing Keltie to leap from the bed and cower in a cold corner near the window.

“Thank you,” Marty said.

And despite being denied her prey (through whatever snake charming abilities Marty seemed to possess), the woman kept right on smiling. “You know, one of these days your big sister is going to stop pretending to be nice.”

“You never could tell me no. Keltie, are you all right?”

“Oh absolutely. Couldn’t be better.”

A sudden, sly expression almost identical to that of the woman’s took hold of Marty’s face. “You couldn’t look better, either,” he said.

“What?” Keltie demanded in a totally flustered tone.

Then she remembered. The corner was cold, but only in part because of the weather. Horrified, Keltie looked down at herself. She was naked as a girl could get.

“Stop that,” Vera chided, glaring at Marty. “Let her get dressed.”

Now it was his turn to be obsequious. Spewing apologies, he looked away. Keltie used the chance to tip-toe to her dresser and find some PJs. There would be no private parties for her downstairs tonight.

An exchange of stories followed. Most of Keltie’s was already familiar to Vera. Indeed, she wound up reminding her of a few things. Mainly, their encounter on the stone bridge behind Pleasant Street School, almost six years ago to the very day.

“I remember some of that,” Keltie confessed. “I even tried to tell my shrink about it once.” She was sitting on the bed. Marty had chosen to lean against the door, while Vera occupied the window, where, she claimed, the draft invigorated her blood. “Something about a monster under the bridge. I hoped it was just a nightmare.”

“It was, darling,” Vera purred.

“You were Supergirl that day,” Marty said. “You told Miss Wheeler to fuck off.”

“So you’ve tried to kill me twice,” Keltie scowled at Vera, ignoring the platitude. “And now we’re supposed to sit here and have a pleasant chat?”

“Merry Christmas,” Vera said.

“I don’t think so.”

But merry or no, the holiday had arrived. It was straight up midnight. Carolers—many of them off key—sang in the halls. Party poppers exploded on the ground floor. Hallelujahs in the name of a newborn king.

“You’re brother and sister?” Keltie said, once the din had subsided.

“Yes,” Marty answered. “Vera’s the older one. I had just started grade school when she was bitten.”

“Bitten?”

“That’s right.”

“What? By a dog?”

She watched Marty and Vera exchange a look.

“Keltie—“ Marty began.

But Vera cut him off. “Surely you’ve put together what we are by now, darling,” she said.

“We have long teeth. We only chase after you at night.”

“You climb up and down buildings,” Keltie added.

“That, too.”

“So what are you supposed to be?”

“It starts with a V and ends with an S.”

“Villains?”

Marty let out a sigh. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. *Vampires*, Keltie. *Nosferatu*. Creatures of the night.”

“And since you’ve greatly offended the head vampire—three times, I might add—he now wants you dead,” Vera proclaimed.

“Wonderful,” Keltie said, rubbing her eyes. “They put me in a detention home for pissing people off. Guess it hasn’t helped. Oh, and I would tell you both that vampire stories are bullshit, but I’ve already seen too much.”

“What do you mean, three times?” Marty asked Vera.

It was Keltie who answered, giving him a bowdlerized version of what had happened at Lions Park last spring. She’d gone for a walk with Penelope, Bolt had swooped from the shadows to attack her, smelled cigarettes on her breath, and fled. Ba-da-boom, ba-da-bing. “And then of course once at the Showboat and once more after I visited Dad last month,” she finished.

“The chase,” Marty said, who’d heard that story rehashed by Keltie just after she’d dressed.

“You’re either very good or very lucky,” Vera put in.

“So what happens now?” Keltie wondered, perplexed far beyond any power to describe the condition with words. “Bolt is just going to keep trying to kill me until he succeeds?”

Vera gave her a simple nod. “That’s what happens.”

“There has to be a way to stop him,” Marty said.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Every problem has a solution, Vera.”

Rather than challenge this dogma, she turned her head to look out the window. From her vantage point on the bed Keltie could not follow her gaze, but guessed she was seeing a world lost under a blanket of white. The wind had howled under the eaves of the old building several times during their exchange, and by the arc-sodium in the parking lot Keltie could see it was still snowing.

“The best thing I can do,” Vera said, “is relay to Bolt that Keltie is dead. That will put him off the chase. Until, of course, he discovers that one of his most trusted minions is a liar.” She gave Marty a cold look. “But I do not offer such assistance for free.”

“Wait,” Keltie broke in. “Hold it.” An idea had occurred to her. “If Bolt wants me dead, then maybe I should want him dead, too.”

“It stands to reason,” Vera agreed, “but be careful when you speak of such things. Words travel fast on the wind.” Her eyes returned to the window. “And it’s a windy night tonight.”

Keltie felt her spine tingle with dread. "You're saying someone outside might hear us? A vampire?"

"Only if one happens to be on the roof. Or in a tree across the way."

"Pretty good hearing," Keltie whispered, almost too softly for her own ears.

"Yes," the other replied. "Indeed it is."

A puzzled look crossed over Marty's face. "Don't worry about it," he said to Keltie. Then: "Vera? I want Keltie safe. You told me you don't work for free—something I already knew. But what do you want in return for this lie you offer to tell?"

His sister looked at Keltie for a moment before answering. "You won't like it," she warned.

"I know that, too. But please tell me."

Vera's lips let out a sigh as she turned back to the glass. "I love winter," she mused. "Cold, barren nights. Walking the pines with the wind in my hair. Far from any road. Alone. Perfectly alone."

"Vera?"

"Sometimes I come across an owl, or a fox. A nocturnal animal like myself. We would regard each other for a moment. Give a nod, or a blink. We love our keeper. She's quiet, and she broods. We love her." She looked at Marty. "I want finality, brother. Darkness forever. Can you give me that?"

"I don't understand," he told her.

Keltie did. Before Vera could explain, she rose from the bed, cutting the vampiress off. "You want to die," she said lowly. "Am I correct?"

"I'm already dead, Keltie. But you're close. What I want is to stop. Forever."

"You want me to pound a stake through your heart," Marty exclaimed. "No way. You ask me that every year and every year I tell you the same thing. Forget it."

"Forget?" Vera asked, raising a brow. "Yes. That is what I want. To forget. I help you and then you help me."

"You're asking me to murder my own sister!"

"I'm asking you to save her."

"I can't! Haven't I told you a thousand times already?"

"Then we are at an impasse."

"You're damned right we are!" With that, Marty opened the door and stormed out. A picture of Santa Claus someone had hung on the other side fell off.

Keltie gave chase. She shouted for him to stop, but was glad when he didn't. Where did the point lie in calling him back? Had their roles been reversed, she would have done the same thing. Vera wanted too much.

But opinions varied. Seconds later the vampiress herself appeared in the doorway. Keltie spared her a glance. When she turned back, Marty had disappeared down the stairs.

"Don't worry," Vera said to the empty hall. "He'll come to his senses."

"What do you mean?" Keltie asked.

"I mean that Marty wants me to die, too. He knows I'm suffering, and he wants me to die, too."

Seven: Back to School

It was months before the three of them met again. Throughout the holiday break Keltie seldom left her room, choosing to keep her nose either in a book or at the window. The scents from both were difficult to interpret. In regard to the former, she kept waiting for something—anything—to happen between the story's two main characters, a girl and a boy who claimed to love each other, but after three hundred pages of pleasant chit-chat hadn't even kissed. As for the latter—

Same thing.

Every time she looked out the window she expected to see Bolt, calmly crossing the parking lot in his pressed slacks, ready to stop fucking around and finish her off for good. Her fear of such a scene increased with each new twilight, to the point where she began to peer over the sill from a crouched position rather than face the outside world head on. Yet New Year's Day came and went without a hint of danger. On the tenth a false summer fell over Norwalk, melting all the snow. Strong southerly winds swept lawns of dead grass. From her room Keltie watched several passers by on Benedict Avenue lose their hats. At night, while in bed, she would hear the occasional loud noise and rush to the window with her heart in her throat. But it was only the wind. A tree limb had fallen; a piece of siding had broken loose from someone's house. Only the wind, each and every time.

By the thirty-first she was convinced that Vera, despite her brother's rejection, had followed through with her offer to report with the death of a certain teenaged delinquent. There had been no attacks, no sightings, no nothing. Keltie began eating lunch in the cafeteria again, rather than in her room. She resumed gymnastics tutoring, much to the delight of her cigarette habit. Her students—Amanda among them—seemed happy to have their clandestine coach back in the gym, and paid generously in cellophane-wrapped decks.

"Are you relaxed?" her psychiatrist asked, on February first.

Sprawled on his couch like Cleopatra after a bang session with Mark Antony, Keltie nodded. "Yes, I'm feeling pretty good. Thank you."

The doctor blew a puzzled haze of smoke from his cigar. "You were panicky all last month."

"I've adapted."

More smoke came, thicker this time. Keltie couldn't even see her doctor's face when he asked: "What have you adapted to, Miss Burke?"

"Fear," she replied.

"Cool," the doctor said, sounding pleased. "So our sessions are working?"

"They're working."

His next words were delivered with the tone of a man who had just won fifty dollars in the lottery. "Wow. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Doctor."

On Valentine's Day she went looking for Marty. He'd all but disappeared from her life after storming off last Christmas, but she carried fond memories of their dance together, and also felt obligated to thank him for twice preventing her death. Armed with a stolen rose from Mrs. Cobb's desk, she walked to the boys' wing entrance.

"Hey!" she called, not quite willing to brave their alien world by stepping into the hall. "Anyone down there?"

It was late afternoon. Classes had ended for the day, and several of the doors stood open.

From behind one of them poked the head of a boy wearing glasses. The glasses tilted as he considered her attire: black top, short denim skirt, studded bracelets.

"You're a girl," he squeaked.

"Wow," Keltie said. "Very good. Most people need two or three guesses before getting that far."

"Sorry. But girls aren't allowed—"

"I know the rules. I'm looking for Marty Calinga. Have you seen him around?"

"Are you his girlfriend?"

Her lip twisted. "Listen, kid—"

"He's in the storage shed," the boy squeaked some more. Keltie began to think he was either the biggest nerd on campus or had one hell of a cold. "Mr. Agee sent him out there for some chalk and pencils. School stuff."

Keltie thanked him and turned to leave.

"You can't go outside without a permit!" the boy called.

"Don't worry about me, kid!" she yelled back. "I'm a seasoned pro!"

She didn't use the back door, which was always locked, but walked straight out the front. Mrs. Cobb said hello. Keltie raised the rose and wished her a happy Valentine's Day.

"Lucky you," the old woman sniffed. "I didn't get a thing."

Indian summer had gone, but the front-step wind was still strong. It whipped around Keltie's skirt, flapping it like a flag. Paying it no mind, she struck off around the building, where a pot-holed driveway led to a field too large to cross in February without a coat. Directly in front of her, though a good distance off, was the Norwalk Middle School. Off to the left, not quite as far but far enough to make Keltie feel stupid for not bundling up, stood a small, one level building used by the DC as a storage facility.

"Shit," she shivered, crossing her arms under her breasts.

At least the muddy grass wasn't an issue. Her boots weathered the terrain with ease, so when at last she reached the shed, she was bone dry. Shivering, but dry. The door—cheap, white wood with a cheap, gold knob—was unlocked. Keltie opened it to a musty interior lit with bare bulbs, ready to call Marty's name. Instead, she froze. Rows of steel shelves and the narrow aisles they created brought memories that, like Keltie, had no permit to be here. She shook her head, clearing the cobwebs. Then a hard, heavy pounding noise from the other end of the room made her scream.

"Who's that?" a voice called.

Keltie clutched her chest, hoping to get her heart slowed down before it exploded. "Hi, Marty," she managed. "It's Keltie. Can I come back?"

He made a noncommittal reply—something that sounded like *free country* or *bees honey*. Wondering if she was about to get stung, Keltie walked towards his voice, to find him standing at a workbench, on top of which lay, of all things, a naked mannequin.

"Wow," Keltie said, treading lightly.

What Marty held in his hands went nowhere towards setting her mind at ease. In one was a stake, in the other a hammer. A face dripping with sweat regarded her.

She noticed a hole in the mannequin's chest, right about where a person's heart would be, and began to get the picture. He was practicing. Preparing for some dreadful task.

"Oh God," she said. "Marty. Is this what it looks like?"

A number of seconds went by while he considered the question. "Am I going through with it, do you mean?" he asked. "Not exactly. But I've decided to try."

"Don't do it for me," Keltie told him. "Please. I'm five feet, two inches tall and weigh a

hundred and four pounds. I can't carry heavy burdens."

"Vera's in pain. She hates what she is. She's been asking me for years to...you know." He looked at the mannequin. "The whole thing is a mess. I don't know if I'm selfish, or cowardly, or noble. She's my sister. We have memories. Good memories from before Bolt came along. How am I supposed to drive a stake through that?"

"I don't know," Keltie answered.

"But you've done it twice."

"I got lucky twice. Hey," she added, thinking of the Showboat, "weren't you working with us that first time? When I got attacked?"

"Yes. You came upstairs covered in blood."

"That's what everyone tells me. I don't remember so well."

"I guess it means I'll be covered in Vera's blood," Marty said, raising the stake and hammer. "If I go through with it, of course."

"Of course," Keltie replied. "By the way"—she showed him the rose—"happy Valentine's Day. You need to put those crazy weapons down before I can give this to you."

With a shy smile, he did as she asked, allowing her to step forward and proffer the gift. He took it gingerly, as if in fear of thorns. What scratched him turned out to be something different: the corner of a small, white card that Keltie barely noticed until now. It looked like a gift card. Slowly, the walls of Keltie's stomach began to tighten.

"You wrote something?" he asked.

I sure as shit hope not.

He opened the card. The smile froze. "To my dearest love," he read aloud.

"Now wait a minute—"

"Sex with you is my greatest dream—"

"What?"

"You make me sigh, you make me scream."

"Stop it! It doesn't say that!"

Laughing, Marty flipped the card over to let her see what was actually a very simple missive: *For Lucinda, my loveliest rose.*

"Ha, ha, ha," Keltie sang flatly. "You're a riot, Marty."

"You stole a rose off Mrs. Cobb's desk? For shame, girl."

"I had to whip up something in a pinch. Are you going to thank me for the thought or chide me some more?"

To her complete surprise, he leaned forward to place a light, tickling kiss on her lips. "Thank you for the thought, Keltie."

She needed a breath of air before answering. "You're uh...you know. You're welcome."

"Are you cold? You don't have a coat."

He took off his jacket and helped her into it, then picked up a box of school supplies from one of the shelves. "Ready to go?"

Keltie nodded. "Anywhere, yes. But are you just going to leave that dead mannequin on the table?"

"Sure," Marty said, with a final glance at the dummy. "Leaving dead things behind. Something tells me I'll need to get very good at that, very soon."

He chose a Sunday to do the deed. The reason, he informed Keltie at lunch on the Friday before, was simple enough: Vera's coffin lay in the basement of a school, which had classes during the week and thus couldn't be encroached on most days.

"Are you going alone?" Keltie wanted to know. The cafeteria was crowded, not due to the food (never that), but the weather, which had turned ice cold over the week. To make matters worse, many of the girls from Keltie's classes already noticed that a new couple had begun taking meals together of late, and today, the grins and giggles seemed to come from everywhere. She wished they would shut up. Then again, she had always acted the same way towards Penelope's new boyfriends. What went around came around.

"Yes," Marty was saying. "Vera's been legally dead for years. My mom thinks she was kidnapped. And she was. She went out to the store one night for Coke and ice cream, and never came home."

"When did that happen?"

He pushed a spoonful of baked beans across his plate. "Oh, I must have been five at the time. She was fifteen."

"And your parents haven't seen her since?"

"No. My mom and dad..." The beans moved some more. "Well, you know the way parents with kids here are."

"Legally dead," Keltie said thoughtfully. "I wonder how many kids Bolt's relegated to that column at the police department."

"Not around here," Marty answered. "Most of Bolt's kind do their hunting in big cities. Cleveland, Columbus, Toledo."

"Toledo vampires?"

"Yep. They suck your blood and make you listen to Lynard Skynard afterward."

"Jesus. That's even worse torture than I'd imagined."

"If they really hate you they make it Rush."

"Stop. I just ate."

They laughed. Several cries of *mercy, mercy* and *well, well, well* were cast in their direction. This time Keltie didn't mind. Let the rumors fly, she thought. They would anyway. Some of them might even turn out to be true, like the one that was sure to exist on Monday morning, the one about her and Marty sneaking away from the grounds on Sunday afternoon. Sneaking away to who knew where, and to what devious, unspeakable antics.

"You don't need to go alone," she told Marty. "I'll come with you."

He started to object; she cut him off, raising her hand like a traffic cop. "Eat your beans. They're getting cold."

After lunch on Sunday they walked out the front door like two people with every right in the world to do so. Keltie held a rake in her hand and made a few well-rehearsed complaints about tidying up the field on such a miserable day, at which Mrs. Cobb warned rather testily that if she didn't like working on Sundays, she'd best straighten up her act while time still remained to become a proper young woman. Thanks to a poor Valentine's Day, Mrs. Cobb had been in a dither all week.

As for the weather, it had warmed a little, though the skies were still bleak with gray clouds. They went into the shed where the stake and hammer still lay. Keltie leaned her rake against the wall.

"I still don't know if I can do this," Marty said. His eyes were on the mannequin. Doubtless they were seeing Vera instead, covered in blood.

"Of course not," Keltie replied. "You won't know anything until it's over."

"I have only the vaguest, most distant memories of her from before. Laughing. Playing with dolls." His hand reached for the stake, but couldn't quite cover the distance as another

memory came home. "She collected My Little Pony toys. Rarity was her favorite. She used to sleep with that one on her pillow."

"I've always been partial to Sunset Shimmer," Keltie said.

It made him smile. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me in the least. Good girl, bad girl."

"Me all over," Keltie admitted, smiling back.

They walked to the middle school, where Keltie might have made the cheerleading squad had she been able to keep her nose out of trouble, then down Christie Avenue, which consisted of more houses like the ones on Benedict: large, old, ornate. At the end of Christie was Norwood Avenue. And on the other side of Norwood...

Keltie stopped.

"What is it?" Marty asked.

They were at the intersection of Christie and Norwood. Keltie's breath had caught in her chest. On the other side of the street was a wooded area of naked, silent trees, waiting for spring. Daylight penetrated it partway, but the terrain turned black deeper in.

"The woods," she let out. "I shouldn't remember them, but now I guess I do. Is the bridge where I was attacked still in there?"

"As far as I know. But Keltie, we don't have to cut through the woods. We can walk down Norwood and take West Elm—"

She waved the proposal off. "It's all right. It's not like Vera wants to hurt me anymore."

A narrow, treacherous path coiled into the trees. Marty told her that many of the junior high kids who didn't ride the bus used it to walk to and from school. Others, like the two of them, were AWOL from the detention center.

"So we may run into friends back here?" Keltie wondered.

"None of my friends," Marty replied, his tone ominous. "But I doubt we'll run into trouble in this weather. It's spring and summer you need to worry about."

"Why?"

"Because that's when the really rough kids come out to play. The ones who get locked in their rooms after classes." He held a low hanging branch up so she could pass. "The ones who'd just as soon put you in the hospital as look at you."

Keltie didn't need further explanation. Some of the girls in her wing had boyfriends like that. They came to class with bruises and extra dark eye-shadow. They rarely talked and never smiled. Her own mother had once been one of those girls. But Keltie didn't need further explanation, because the world was what it was. She had accepted it long ago. For all of its pain and poison, she had accepted it. Why, though, had everyone else—people who were smarter and more powerful than she—accepted it, too? Where was it written that a man could not deviate from a set course?

Rather than wonder about it further, she allowed Marty to help her down into a dry gorge, and then up the other side. They strode for another hundred yards or so along a ridge at the edge of the wood. To their left was an open wheat field. On the right, a drop that plunged to a frozen pond. The ice tempted Keltie for a skate. As a young girl, she'd learned how on other ponds like this one.

"I know a couple of kids who skate here sometimes," Marty said, as if reading these thoughts. "Not me, though. I can't even stand up on ice skates."

"I can teach you," Keltie offered. "If you like."

Before he could answer they had to duck behind a tree. A police car passing by on Pleasant Street had slowed down to have a look into the gorge.

"Hold your breath," Marty whispered.

Smiling up at him, she drew in a gasp and did exactly that. It was a mistake. The car pulled to a gravel area that led partway into the gorge and stopped. For the sake of her own levity, Keltie felt obliged to wait. Ten seconds passed. Fifteen. Twenty. Her mittened hand tightened on Marty's arm. Counting the time it had taken for the car to pull in, a full half a minute had gone by since she'd last taken a breath.

"Uh!" she let out. "Nn!"

Marty heard it. He turned to find her puffy-cheeked and wide-eyed with pain. "What the hell?" he asked.

Forcing a smile, Keltie pointed to her throat: *Air!*

Comprehension flooded his features. "Okay, Tanya Streeter, he's turning around. You can breathe now."

"Gah!" she gasped. "Phew! Thank you!"

"When I said to hold your breath, I only meant it as a figure of speech."

"Well, I wanted to make you certain I'm with you all the way on this."

They waited until the cop had gone before leaving the woods. They crossed a river which led through a park (and which, if followed in the other direction, would lead them to a certain stone bridge that Keltie never wanted to lay eyes on again), then walked to the school, where every single slot in the parking area was empty, as were the bike racks, the swings, the monkey bars. The school was closed. Shut down. Asleep.

"Sunday," Marty said, looking into a row of dark windows. Like the pond, his eyes were frozen. Black pearls set beneath an unstable sheen of apprehension. He grasped one of Keltie's mittens and squeezed.

"We can still go back," Keltie said, wishing for wiser words that simply refused to come.

Marty either disagreed or didn't hear at all. Whichever, he began to walk slowly across the parking lot. The stake and hammer were clutched in one hand, though Keltie wasn't sure he even knew anymore. She watched him approach the school like a man lost in a dream.

"Hey," she called. "Wait for me."

The back door was locked. Peering through the glass, Keltie could see a long, dark hallway, lined with classrooms, that led to the school foyer. Crayon-colored paper hung on the doors. Drawings of stick figures with smiley faces. Signs that said *Right to Read Week* and *Math is Fun!*

Keltie shook her head. "There's no way in hell we're going in here."

"Why not?" Marty wanted to know.

She gave him a look. "Because the door's locked, stupid. And even if we could get it open, we'd trip the—"

He reached into his pocket and showed her a key.

"alarm," she finished. "Yeah. Marvelous. Where did you get that?"

"Won it on The Price Is Right playing Plinko." The key popped into the lock, turned.

"Voila," Marty said, pushing the door open. "Ladies first?"

Her eyes wandered back down the empty hall. "How many vampires sleep here?"

"Just the one, to my knowledge."

Nevertheless, she insisted they cross the threshold together. Marty paused once to relock the door, then it was off down memory lane. Keltie's old fourth grade classroom showed up. She spared a glance inside, spying her former desk by the window, and the pencil sharpener she'd used every day. The latter brought the smell of shavings, which lingered as they passed the other rooms. At a place just shy of the foyer, Marty gave a gentle tug to the left.

“Gymnasium,” he said. “This way.”

Keltie followed him through an anteroom where she and Penelope had once fluffed Christmas decorations for a pageant. They’d needed to make them pretty as possible before setting them up on stage. Penelope did the colors; Keltie re-glued a few loose white beards and sleigh bells. It had been the day before Christmas break. There’d been candy canes and hot chocolate. Pine needles. Laughing faces everywhere. Everyone smiling, everyone happy.

The gym was mostly too dark to see, but a few familiar ghosts hovered in the gloom. A basketball hoop, a drinking fountain. Heavy blue curtains—the same ones from five years back—hung on either side of a stage that Marty mounted before extending a hand so Keltie could do the same. At the rear of the stage was a door. Behind the door, a flight of steps that went down.

“I never even knew this school had a basement,” Keltie marveled.

“All the better for people like Vera,” came Marty’s reply. “Now where’s that light switch?”

There was a click, and the stairs came alight. A wooden door with a black window stood at the bottom. Suddenly unwilling to move another inch, Keltie stared at it.

“Vera sleeps down there?” she whispered.

“Correct,” the other answered.

“Why?”

“I asked her that once. She told me this school was the last place she remembered being happy.”

“That’s hard to imagine. For me there’s a few little things here and there, but most of the memories are bad.”

“For me, too. But Vera had lots of friends. Plus she was in good with the teachers.”

“So people missed her.” It wasn’t even a question. Keltie knew what missing someone felt like.

“People missed her plenty. You should hit the microfilm reader at the library. Quite a search took place after she disappeared.”

“And it’s a cold case now?” Keltie asked, genuinely curious.

The shiver that came with Marty’s answer couldn’t have been more fitting. “Cold as death,” he whispered.

They started down.

Eight: Lair of the Beast

Bolt loved the cold and rain. From his nightly November walks through newly opened Hyde Park in 17th century London, to his lonesome hiking trips upon the snowy slopes of present day Alaska, there gleamed not the faintest ray of moonlight he mourned, nor was there a single star in the sky he envied. Bolt's mentor, a woman named Anissa, had been fond of intoning time and again: *Let lovers have the moon, and workers have the sun; darkness is for scoundrels.* Bolt stood by it as steadfastly today as he had five hundred years ago, when she'd first uttered the words, which was why northern Ohio—with its uncommon amount of dark days and chilly nights—made for such a fine place to live. He liked it here, and intended to stay for as long as he could. Not only was the weather perfect, but the police were fairly stupid as well. He'd been killing in the area for fifteen years.

Anissa...

Ah, she'd been a fine lady! His first love, and still his only love. She'd taken his blood, and in return, provided eternity. On evenings like this one, Bolt liked to spend a few extra minutes lying in his coffin just to think back on their time together: her delicate curves, her long red hair, her green eyes. Her shark-fanged mouth with teeth so jagged they tore human flesh into wrecked battle flags. She'd been a sexy beast, no doubt about it.

"And why should I let you live?" the fangs had asked on the very first night, so long ago, she'd invaded Bolt's small farmhouse near Frodsham. He'd been pinned on the floor like a mouse. Her hands were exquisitely cold, her eyes the same.

"I love you," he whispered, unable to speak anything but the truth in the grip of such terror.

"I'm sorry?" she'd asked. "What was that?"

"You heard me. I love you. And I mean it." He felt the hands loosen a little on his wrists. "Don't do that. Please."

"Doesn't it hurt?" the creature holding him had asked.

"I can't think of anything that hurts right now. You may kill me, if you like. Then I can tell my maker I died for the woman I love. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like your mind has gone. But since no one has spoken to me like that in about a thousand years I'm going to let you go."

"But I just asked you not to do that."

"My Lord? Are you in there?"

Bolt blinked. Anissa's toothy smile became cloudy, and disappeared. That was all right; he could always dream of her later.

"Yes, Lloyd," he said into the blackness of his coffin. "You want to step back so I can open this thing up?"

"Indeed, My Lord."

Bolt pushed on the lid. Nothing happened. He pushed again. "Goddammit. Lloyd? The latch is stuck again."

"A pity, My Lord," he heard his servant say.

"Yeah. I'm in here crying my eyes out. Give the lid a kick for me."

"My Lord?"

Bolt rolled his eyes. "Jesus Christ. Kick the fucking coffin, Lloyd! The latch is stuck!"

Everything shook as something that felt like an elephant struck the side of the coffin. Tumbling sideways, Bolt let out a cry. A moment later he was spilled onto the basement floor, with the casket lying open on its side.

“My Lord!” Lloyd exhaled. “Oh, my dear, sweet Lord!”

Bolt stood and dusted himself off. He looked at the wreckage of his coffin. The latch was no longer jammed; it was broken in two. “Well, we got the fucking thing open, anyway,” he said. “Let’s go upstairs, Lloyd. I’m hungry.”

“My Lord?” Lloyd said, as Bolt rummaged through the refrigerator. “I thought vampires were incapable of ingesting normal foods.” Lloyd was an old man, though nowhere near as old as some. He had only just recently come under Bolt’s employ, hired out of a service in Port Clinton for the simple reason that they asked the fewest questions.

Bolt snatched a container of spaghetti and a can of Diet Coke off the shelf before answering. “Vampires don’t exist, old bean. That means we can eat whatever the hell we want.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

He handed the spaghetti to Lloyd. “Nuke this, will you?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“And cut it out with the *Yes, My Lord* shit. It’s annoying.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

He ate his meal in the kitchen with the television tuned to CNN. Mildly grim news about politics, stocks, and the entertainment industry floated over the table. Donald Trump’s microphone had caught fire during a speech but nobody was hurt. Two male actors had come out of the closet as gay and were now vacationing together in Hawaii. Wolf Blitzer, looking disappointed with no airplane crashes to talk about, reported on a suspicious-looking suitcase found in the New York subway system.

After dinner he went into the living room. Silent and composed, Lloyd followed. The butler had already lit the fireplace and turned on the PC. A picture of Chris Sarandon wearing a grey overcoat lit up the screen. Bolt briefly considered sitting down in front of the keys, then placed himself on the couch instead. The local newspaper lay open on the coffee table. More grimness. Norwalk was still refusing to spray for mosquitoes. Three more blighted homes had been set for demolition.

“Bah,” Bolt said, refusing to read any of it. His eye wandered back to Chris Sarandon. “What’s on the internet tonight, Lloyd?”

“Porn, My Lord.”

Bolt grunted at this. “Good porn or bad porn?”

“I’m not certain I can understand the difference, My Lord. There are straights and homosexuals. Doms, subs. Bestiality. And of course sodomy.”

“Of course. We mustn’t leave that one out.”

“Do women truly enjoy sodomy, My Lord?” Lloyd asked, in a tone that seemed appalled by the very idea.

“I suppose it all depends on what color the guy’s cock is,” Bolt answered.

“Have you ever bitten a man, My Lord?”

The vampire stopped for a moment. Here lay a question that proposed some awkward responses indeed. Except in this case, Bolt had none to give. “No,” he told his servant, “I can’t say I ever have, Lloyd.”

“Isn’t that a bit sexist, My Lord?”

Bolt snorted. If tonight’s conversation wasn’t ridiculous already, then this topic certainly made it so. “Sexist against whom, Lloyd?”

“Why, the ladies, of course.”

“Because I’m killing them and not the men?”

“Indeed, My Lord.”

“Lloyd,” Bolt said, “if you wanted to work for a gay vampire, then you should have put it on your resume.” He picked up the newspaper. “Anyway, let’s talk about something else. I hate listening to how difficult females and non-whites have things.” He could almost feel the butler’s incredulity at this remark. It was amusing, and it made him smile within the safety of the headlines.

“But My Lord...you’re black,” Lloyd pointed out.

Bolt looked away from an article about pig farming to consider his arm. “Yes. So I am.”

“My Lord?”

“Lloyd, do you honestly think I would sit here and blame white people for every shitty thing that’s ever happened to me?”

“It would be a rather convenient thing to do, My Lord.”

“Convenient and lazy are often closely related. If a white person were ever to have the insane courage to say to me: *Bolt, old bean, you can’t do that. You’re black. Black people aren’t good enough for that.* I wouldn’t call that person a racist, I’d call him an asshole. Then I would set out to prove him wrong. Ah!” A headline near the bottom of page three caught his eye. “Listen to this, Lloyd. **Two Children Missing From Norwalk’s Juvenile Detention Center.**”

The butler made a sound of approval.

“Two children are believed to have left the juvenile detention center on Benedict Avenue without permission last Sunday night,” Bolt continued, “and have not returned. Martin Calinga and Keltie Burke, both age sixteen, were last seen at bedtime on the night of February nineteenth. They were reported missing the next morning by receptionist Lucinda Cobb after friends noticed they had not come down for breakfast.” He paused here to smile up at Lloyd. “Likely they became breakfast themselves.”

“So Miss Burke is no longer a threat to your species?” Lloyd put forth.

“She was never a threat, Lloyd. Just a pain in the ass.” He looked back at the article. “But I’m rather surprised Vera decided to take her own brother as well.”

“Perhaps he interfered with her engagement, My Lord.”

“I suppose that could be it. I’ll have to ask her tonight how it all went down.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“I would have taken care of it myself, except that Keltie is—was—a smoker. Bah.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Satisfied with the night’s news, Bolt tossed the newspaper back onto the table. “Anyway. With that bit of unpleasantness finally out of the way, we can proceed to the next order of business. Let’s see,” he went on, rising from the couch, “if there are any cute Cleveland girls on Facebook I can hook up with later.” He batted a wink at Lloyd before taking a seat in front of the computer. “For some clubbing and spirits. You know.”

“Yes, My Lord,” the butler replied. “Indeed I do.”

Nine: Splattered

*There once was a ship called Endurance,
Through the pack ice did she sail,
Marked by Antarctic occurrence,
One time in a killing gale.*

*She was a strong barquentine vessel,
Designed for uneasy terrain,
'Til upon ice did her hull nestle,
And upon ice was cleft in twain.*

*In coldness we must needs remember,
She holds fast from bow to stern,
Forever in silent splendor,
In coldness will memories burn.*

*I love you, Marty. Always.
--Vera*

But in the end he couldn't do it. He placed the stake upon her chest, raised the hammer high...and faltered. Snug in the bowels of the school, protected from his blasphemy by the myriad shadows that lay draped over everything like burial cloths, he faltered. And though Keltie couldn't be sure, she thought he'd begun to weep.

"Think of something happy," Vera said softly from inside her casket. "Like the poem says, Marty. We can always remember."

"Memories hurt."

"Only if you see them as something forever lost. That isn't what they're for, darling. They're proof of a life that you once lived, and one day may live again."

Keltie watched the hammer—a mere outline in the weak light—tremble for a moment.

"Do it," the vampiress whispered. "Please, Marty. Please."

There was another moment. A moment, a twinkle. An eternity. Slowly, the hammer began to descend, until Marty, no longer possessed of the strength to lift it, placed it in the casket, and withdrew.

For a time Keltie could do nothing. She stared at the casket, thinking that perhaps Vera would rise to beckon her brother back. But no. Save for a rogue draft amongst the cobwebs overhead, all was silent and still.

"Vera," she whispered. And again when no answer came: "Vera."

"Is that you, Keltie?" the other's voice floated upward.

"Yes."

"Come here, please. And mind the spider."

Keltie's boot, which had moved forward a step, froze. "What spider?"

"You'll see it when you're here."

Now fearing two entities instead of one, Keltie approached the casket. Her eyes darted everywhere. She'd never been keen on spiders; now was not a time for about facing. And then, just before Vera's body came into view, she saw it. A large brown creature with eight

legs, bigger than Keltie's hand, brooded on the wall at eye level.

"Holy shit," she gushed.

"Now now," Vera said, "don't frighten her."

"Me frighten *her*?"

"She's what the Australians call a huntsman. Quite beautiful. And quite harmless."

Keltie looked at the spider, which seemed to be looking back at her. Its black eyes shined like crystals in the darkness. "If you don't mind, I'd rather judge her for myself," she told Vera.

"My judgment comes today, Keltie. Save hers for another time."

The graveness in Vera's tone made her look down. A woman in white looked back, with eyes black as the huntsman's. She wore a smile on a pair of bleached lips cracked with dryness. A green ribbon was tied around her neck.

"Good afternoon," the lips spoke.

Keltie made no reply. Her gaze went to the woman's hands, which lay at rest on the counterpane. The fingers appeared long enough, the nails sharp enough, to slice off a human head if they so desired. Further down were two bare, bloodless feet with toes like talons.

"Fiction," Vera said.

Keltie looked up. "What?"

"Fiction. That's me. A monster who pretends to be a woman. I wear a white dress. I teach young folk how to be strong, and old folk how to die. I bend the truth. Shape it into forms that please my students. And whenever my master needs me, I'm there for him."

"Bolt."

"Yes," Vera went on. "But he made a mistake. He thought that eventually I would claim my brother. Take him into the family. Instead, he became my lifeline, tethering me to whom I once was." Her eyes wandered back to the spider as she spoke. "It was gossamer, like the silk this creature spins, but it was there. And it still is."

"I don't think Marty can do as you ask," Keltie said. "Not that I blame him."

"But you must blame him," the other replied, in a tone that bordered on abhorrence. "You must."

"Why?"

"Because now that line is attached to you."

Keltie's breath stopped. Slack-jawed, she stared at Vera. *You cannot be serious!* a famous voice shouted from somewhere in the depths of her mind. But apparently the vampiress meant every word she said. Her eyes, as well as that bleached smile, lingered over Keltie, waiting for what would happen next. The ball was on her side of the court.

"Don't," Keltie pleaded. The stake and hammer were still in the casket. More scared of them now than of the spider, her eyes gave a wide berth. "Don't ask me, Vera. Please."

"I'm not asking. I gave you three months' reprieve from Bolt. Now it's time to pay."

"But I can't."

"You've done it before."

She spoke in a way that suggested the deed would be no more difficult than executing a scorpion on the balance beam, and it made Keltie want to laugh. "Out of self-defense, Vera," she explained, "and I got lucky. That's really all that happened. I got lucky."

"Then you're on firmer ground than you believe. Because today you won't need luck."

"No? What then?"

"Only the compassion that's always been in you."

"I live in a juvenile detention home, Vera, and it's not because I'm compassionate."

"You also came here with Marty. Because you didn't want him to face this alone. And don't

forget Meow-Meow.”

“Meow-Meow was just a cat,” Keltie reminded her. “She’s dead now.”

Vera frowned. “You don’t give yourself many accolades, do you?”

“Too often they turn out to be nothing.”

“Not this time. Pick up the stake and hammer.”

“No.”

“If you don’t,” Vera said, showing her teeth, “I’ll kill you.”

“You don’t mean that. And once Bolt finds you dead, he’ll come to kill me anyway.”

Vera’s eyes turned the blood red of slashed wrists. Her hand, now more like a claw, snatched at Keltie’s neck and found right where to squeeze, cutting off any chance of a scream for help. “I am running out of nice things to say,” Keltie heard as she squirmed for air. “Understand? Nod like you understand, girl. *Good.*” The claw loosened a little. “I’m sorry for scaring you, but remember that my human qualities have long since gone to rot, and can’t always support the weight pressed upon them. When I can’t get what I want by negotiation I have to go with savagery.”

“Yes,” Keltie hissed through gritted teeth. “Thank you for reminding me.”

“Now when I release you, you’re going to pick up the stake and hammer as asked, and carry on where my brother could not.” The face looking at her, all teeth and eyes, tilted to the left. “Is this clear?”

“Yes!”

The teeth smiled. “Marvelous.”

Keltie’s first reaction, once the claw let her go, was to check her throat for blood. There was none. Satisfied as she could be with these findings given the circumstances, she then placed her regard back on the afternoon’s main issue, who had nestled herself once more into the casket as if nothing at all untoward had happened.

“Vera—”

Are you sure? Keltie almost finished, before realizing how stupid it would have sounded.

“Yes?” the vampiress asked.

A sudden memory struck her. “You never gave me my box turtle,” she answered.

“I thought it understood there never actually was one. Now pick up the stake and hammer.”

Trapped between two despicable things—to kill or be killed—Keltie decided to do as she was told. *Marty*, she thought with unfair contempt, *you son of a bitch, this is going to cost you big. And where the hell did you run off to anyway?*

The hammer felt heavier than she’d expected. Lifting it caused the small muscles in her arm to go taut. For all of that, placing the stake on Vera’s chest took more effort still. Her hand trembled.

“Upside down,” Vera said.

The stake shook. “Huh?”

“The sharp end goes on my chest, darling, not the other way about.”

Flustered, Keltie twisted her hand, but instead of executing the neat baton twirl she’d been rather foolishly hoping for, the stake dropped and clattered at her feet. Keltie bent, picked it up, struck her head on one of the coffin handles.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” she confessed, once Vera’s face was back in view.

“Clearly not,” the other retorted. “Take a few deep breaths if you wish.”

“Not sure it would help. Let’s try again.”

“Wait. I forgot one thing.” Before Keltie could open her mouth to ask what, Vera sat up in the coffin. In one swift motion, she lifted her gown over her head, exposing two high, small

breasts with dark nipples. "There," she said, lying back. "See my ribs? Place the stake between them, just over the heart."

"Are you really feeling as brave as you look?" Keltie was forced to ask. "Because if so, it's a bit of a head-scratcher to say the least."

"I'm a little frightened," Vera allowed. "I've read that it hurts. Really, really bad." Her eyes narrowed at Keltie. "I may scream. Beg you to stop. Don't. Under no circumstances are you to allow yourself the slightest bit of sympathy towards my plight. Understood?"

"You want this very badly, don't you?"

"I'm a weapon that's tired of killing." Vera's head sank further into the pillows, and a smile found its way to her lips. "I hope to come back in the next life as a flower. Nothing complex or multi-colorful. Just a small, pretty flower, growing in a field of warm winds with lots of others like me. How I would love that. To be pretty and harmless."

Keltie placed the tip of the stake under Vera's left breast. It pressed on the delicate skin. She wasn't certain, but it seemed she could feel the stake vibrate with every beat of the vampiress' cold heart.

"Good girl," the pale lips whispered. "Now I'm going to take in a deep breath and hold it. Let it be my last, darling."

Keltie gave her a slow nod. "Make it a good one."

"Oh I will." Vera closed her eyes. Her lips parted. "*Ahhhhhhhhhh!*" she gasped.

Keltie felt her chest rise against the stake...and wait. She raised the hammer. It hurt her arm to do so, but she raised it, staring into Vera's eyes. *Go*, those eyes pleaded. *Go, go*.

Yet still she hesitated. The arm holding the hammer began to throb. Before long she would need to lower it, to rest her muscles. That would never do. Not with Vera holding her breath like a woman waiting to be let out of a milk tank. Keltie didn't know how long she could last...and at the bottom line, it didn't matter. Vera had sent Bolt off the trail of Keltie's blood in return for another favor that Marty now owed. A life for a life. A breath spent for a breath drawn. Marty had not been able to see that, but was it really Marty whom Vera had struck the bargain with anyway?

Hard as she could, Keltie slammed the hammer down. A fountain of thick, black blood splattered her. Keltie raised the hammer and dropped it again—*WHACK!* More blood, hot and sticky, spewed into her eyes. Now she couldn't see. Not caring in the slightest, she raised the hammer.

"WAIT!" Vera screamed. *"WAIT, PLEASE! I'M SORRY!"*

WHACK!

"KELTIE! KELTIE IT HURTS!"

WHACK! WHACK!

"I DIDN'T MEAN IT! I DIDN'T MEAN IT! I'M SORRY FOR EVERYTHING, JUST PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!"

Keltie couldn't hear. There was no reason to hear. She was swinging the hammer like a madwoman, up and down, up and down, gritting her teeth. The stake had long since gone all the way through Vera's body. Splinters from the casket's bottom dappled the floor. Vera took a wet, ragged breath. In the next second Keltie's face was splashed with bloody vomit. And still she went right on pounding. Pounding until her own breath threatened to give out, and her arm could no longer manage the duty placed upon it. Physically, this was the toughest thing she had ever done. But mentally? Mentally, she was having a fucking blast. Later she would wonder why. She would ask herself where this savage, deranged girl had come from. But right now? Right now she just wanted to enjoy the crazy bitch's company.

“DIE!” she shrieked into Vera’s dying face. ***“Die, you fucking parasite! You monster! YOU WORTHLESS PIECE OF MISERABLE UNDEAD SHIT!”***

There was a clatter at her feet. Keltie looked down to see the hammer lying on its side. So that was it then. Mission accomplished. Deed fulfilled. No wonder the room had fallen so silent all of a sudden. And when she looked back into the casket, Keltie saw that Vera was dead. Something that looked like a twisted, uprooted tree trunk now occupied the casket. Vera’s eyes were splayed open. Her jaw hung at a crooked angle. Seeing her made Keltie—who stood soaked in blood from head to toe—think of only one word.

“Done,” she said.

She turned to go...and Vera’s body burst into flames.

“Keltie?” a voice called from the top of the stairs. “Keltie where are you?”

“I’m here, Marty,” she called back, staring into the flames.

“Is Vera with you?”

Keltie closed her eyes. She couldn’t answer that question just yet. It had been cruel, really, for Marty to even ask. God yes. Cowardly and cruel, that was Marty at the moment.

No it’s not, some scrap of reason tried to tell her from what felt like a million miles away. *What would you have done, had the roles been reversed? Eh, girl? Tell me.*

“I would have *killed* her,” Keltie whispered.

Well, then you’re even more fucked up than I thought.

“Maybe,” Keltie said. “I could be wrong, so wrong. But maybe, maybe.”

Leaving the fire to burn, she left the basement in coldness.

Ten: Trudging Home

They walked home through the woods, with Keltie still soaked in blood. Marty took her the back way (to approach the gorge from Pleasant street, in her current state, would have been madness), which put them on a route Keltie had already been familiar with for years. There was the playground, of course, and the football field. The opening in the trees. And yes, the path to the old stone bridge.

Daylight faded as they walked. Shadows began to crowd the trees, thicker and thicker, until Keltie could barely see the path. Squinting, she searched for the bridge. They were almost upon it. Had to be. As if to beckon them, a cold evening wind swept through the dead limbs. Keltie shivered, but doubted Marty would offer to put his arm around her. He hadn't spoken a word since leaving the school. Why should he? She had just murdered his sister and was now tacky with her blood. The more interesting question was this: Why didn't she—Keltie—feel like a girl on the verge of a nervous breakdown? What she had just done, the things she had shouted...utterly maniacal all. She should be gibbering in a corner somewhere, not doing an evening stroll, a nature hike, worried more about flies nesting in her blood-matted hair than her mind cracking open and exploding like an old basement boiler.

Because someone in pain needed you to help her, and you did. It wasn't easy, but you did.

"It was easy," Keltie said, hoping Marty wouldn't hear. "I gotta be crazy, because it was so easy."

They crossed the bridge. Keltie looked into the water, which was black with night. All the wet weather brought it up high, the way it had been so many years ago. Indeed, its strong current threatened to overtake the bridge and perhaps wet the feet of crossers by. Remembering everything that once happened here, Keltie looked into the water. She looked into the water and felt nothing.

Marty did not take her directly to the detention center. It might have been worth doing just to see the look on Mrs. Cobb's face, Keltie thought, but no, he took her to the shed where she'd encountered him earlier, slaughtering his mannequin. Once they were inside, with the door closed, he at last deigned to speak.

"Wait here," he said in a toneless voice. "I'll get you clothes and some water to wash the blood."

Keltie agreed, and minutes later he returned with a duffle bag and a plastic bowl filled with hot water. He then waited with his back turned while she undressed from head to foot. Vera's blood proved stubborn. It took several more minutes to get enough of it off that she could with minimal confidence walk back to her room without terrorizing anyone. Inside the bag was a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt. Marty had also rather thoughtfully included a hat to cover the worst of her mangled hair. He insisted on walking her to her room, though she felt hardly in need of such chivalry. In any case, they found the halls dimly lit and deathly quiet. The night was still young, but on Sundays most of the students retired to their rooms early.

They met only one girl out wandering. Marty was leading her up a back stairwell (where someone's candle, no doubt left over from mass, stood flickering in a naked window) when all at once Keltie heard footsteps. She looked up to see a face that—of course—she knew. Sadie's.

"Hello, Sadie," she muttered, hoping the other would ignore her.

"Hello Kel...*WHOA! Fucking awesome!*"

Keltie covered her face and tried to get by. "Excuse me, please."

"You look like fucking Carrie White! Sincerely! I love it!"

"Yeah," Keltie nodded.

"Was there a costume party somewhere?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck!" Sadie barked. "I wish I could have gone! I would have dressed up like the goblin king from Labyrinth!"

"Yeah," Keltie said, rolling her eyes. "You would have definitely nailed that shit to the wall."

"Fucking-a I would've!"

"Gotta go now, Sadie."

She and Marty went to her room. Keltie grabbed a fresh towel, then told Marty to wait while she went down the hall to shower. She returned twenty minutes later with said towel wrapped around herself to find the Filipino boy brooding at the window. His reflection hovered outside like a ghost. Keltie looked at it, finding nothing to ascertain. She'd seen sheets of bond paper with more emotion.

"I'm sorry," she told him, the words rising up almost too fast to understand what they were for.

"Why?" Marty asked.

"I should be trying to comfort you. But I don't know how."

"You've done plenty today already."

Was there a nip of accusation in his voice? Keltie tried to tell herself not, but it was impossible to be sure. Marty's reflection remained blank. His eyes were a million miles off.

"Therapy isn't my thing," she said. A rather useless image of the school psychiatrist floated in her thoughts. What she and Marty were dealing with at the moment ranged just a tad beyond the pipe-smoker's depth.

"I don't need therapy," the other came back with.

"Okay. So what do you need?"

Marty turned around. The distant expression on his had flown. "I need," he began.

If you say 'a cold beer', or make some other stupid joke I'm kicking you right the fuck out of this room.

"I need for Bolt to die, Keltie. Preferably in the most horrible way possible. I need for Bolt to die."

"Because of the life he forced Vera to lead?"

"Absolutely. Her and others like her. So I'm leaving tonight. I want to find him and kill him."

Keltie took a seat on the bed. A long time passed before she could muster a reply. Or perhaps it only seemed that way, for when she raised her head, Marty was still there, and still looked ready to fight. "*Auribus teneo lupum*," she whispered.

"What?"

"It's Latin. Means *I hold a wolf by the ears*."

"I don't understand."

She shrugged. "It's all right. Just a little something I caught while accidentally paying attention in class."

"Well it's funny you should mention wolves," Marty said, leaning his butt against Penelope's old study desk. "I won't be here tomorrow. There's a town to the east. South of Cleveland. It's called Howling."

"*Howling*?" Keltie repeated. "I've never heard of it."

“It isn’t very big. But there’s another vampire there. One Vera used to talk about. Whenever she wanted to contact Bolt she went through him.”

“And let me guess: You’re going to force him to spew up his master’s whereabouts. Make him spill his guts. Figuratively at first—“

“And then literally,” Marty finished.

She looked at him like he was nuts. “What makes you think you can do that?”

The reply that came did nothing to swerve her expression. Quite the reverse. “I don’t have a plan yet,” Marty said sheepishly.

“Don’t say that to the guy when you see him.”

“I’m *sorry!*” he barked, making her jump. “Who the fuck am I supposed to be, anyway? Abe Van Helsing? I can’t...” Keltie watched his eyes close for a moment. “Kill vampires,” he all but vomited out with disgust.

“I’ll go with you,” she said. “I’m pretty sure I need to, anyway. Once Bolt finds out about Vera he’ll be coming straight for me.”

He sent her a grave look. “And he won’t play around this time. He’ll break right through your window.”

“I know. It’s time to disappear.”

“You mean run away?”

Keltie almost laughed at his worried countenance. Instead, she rose from the bed (with the towel still her only protection from pure nakedness), and took a seat next to him on the desk.

“Not a chance,” she said. “But we need a plan. A *good* plan.”

Marty shook his head. “Better than good. It needs to be perfect.”

“Don’t push it. There’s no such thing as perfection.”

“No? Keltie, haven’t you ever ordered the spinach lasagna from Sbarro’s?”

“Um...no. But I will if we live long enough to have a real date.”

She studied him with incredulity. Food. After what had happened today, they were talking about food. But at least Marty no longer looked ready to cry. He was, in fact, smiling for the first time in about twelve hours.

“Go back to your room,” she said. “Shower. Get some clean clothes in a bag. Take a nap. I’ll meet you at the shed at”—she checked the Ben and Holly clock—“say four-thirty?”

“I’ll be there.”

After he’d gone, Keltie dropped her towel and slipped under the covers of her bed. She did not think sleep would come. Half an hour later, though, she was in dreamland. Floating without a map, without a plan. Or in other words, going about business as usual.

Hapless, helpless, and brutal.

Eleven: Run Down

“How long can you stay up there?” Marty wanted to know.

The balance beam creaked as Keltie did two pivot turns, then went into a split leap. “Until I start thinking too much about how crazy this is,” she said.

They had the school gym all to themselves. As usual, its endless cache of shadows and cool drafts made Keltie think of mausoleums. It was one of the reasons she did not like to work on the beam alone. The detention center was old and full of ghosts, and when you thought about them, they sometimes showed up.

“Boo!” Marty said, grinning.

“Knock it off. I’m about to dismount.”

She took two steps forward before going into her best Nellie Kim off the edge of the beam. The move was of Olympic difficulty, which meant her execution landed far from perfection. Still, she managed not to fall on her ass, and opened her eyes to the sound of applause.

“Bravo,” Cameron said.

“Daddy!”

“You do that with a third degree lateral sprain and the network will have a coronary.”

She walked off the mat to give him a hug. It didn’t seem strange that Marty had vanished, or that the shine in Cameron’s glasses looked more ominous than friendly. Not even the creepy gym mattered at the moment. The old man’s very presence overruled the whole world.

His hug was brief, however, and when Keltie pulled back, she saw that the odd shine in his glasses remained. “Daddy?” she asked.

“How are you, sweetheart?”

“Well—”

Something heavy came down nearby, shaking the entire room. Keltie’s head spun towards a pair of double doors on the far wall. The impact came again, followed by a distant scream. Lights overhead began to sway.

“Daddy, what is that?”

“There’s something in the school, sweetheart,” he said. “It’s looking for you.”

BOOM! The gymnasium shook some more. One of the double doors clicked...and came open the tiniest bit.

“It’s looking for you, Keltie. Okay? Do you understand?”

“Daddy!”

BOOM!

“Daddy, where is it?”

“It’s in the hallway. Now listen to me.” His hands fell on her shoulders and gave them a shake. “*Listen.* I want you to count to twenty and run. That’s all you can do. It’s your only chance.”

As he finished speaking there was a fifth jolt, the hardest one yet. Keltie screamed, expecting to see the terrible thing that wanted her—whatever it was—come crashing through the wall at any moment. Above, the lights were in full swing. Shadows danced everywhere, making an already dark gym even harder to see. She would never find her way out before the monster got her. It was impossible.

BOOM!

The backboard on one of the basketball hoops shattered. Glass rained on the floor in a chaotic symphony. One of the shards struck Keltie on the foot. She turned to jump into

Cameron's arms...only to find him gone. The gym stood empty from corner to corner.

"Oh no!" she cried. "Oh please, no!"

Count to twenty and run.

"One," she said, and was immediately interrupted by another one of the hollow, heavy jolts. This one broke open a crack on the opposite wall that reached all the way to the ceiling. "Two. Three."

Somehow, she made it all the way to twenty. By then the gym was a shambles. Piles of broken glass shined underfoot. Shards of wood stabbed at her, eager to draw blood. Keltie went out a different pair of doors than the ones she'd seen come open a minute earlier. They dumped her into a locker-lined hallway where she found, of all people, Frog. The school gym coach.

"Not this way!" Frog's round, doughy face warned. "It's too close! Go out through the foyer!"

Without thinking, Keltie found a door on the right that pitched her into the boys' wing. More lockers greeted her here. Classroom doors with glass transoms stood wide open. Almost on cue, a boy with glasses poked his head out from one of them and stared at her.

"You're a girl," he squeaked. "Girls aren't allowed here. You'll have to run through."

"No problem," Keltie said, before taking off at a sprint.

The school had fallen utterly silent since she'd left the gym, but it scarcely mattered. She could sense that the hunt for her blood remained active; the very walls seemed to radiate doom and dread. There was no safety here, no sanctity. She needed to be outside and far away.

At the end of the hall stood a door that let on the foyer. Keltie ran through it. Mrs. Cobb looked up from behind the front desk. "Happy Valentine's Day, bitch!" she scowled.

"Run!" Keltie screamed at her, dashing to the front doors. Through them she could see a hard, heavy rain pounding the lot. Once she stepped outside it instantly soaked her to the skin. Deafened by its roar, she ran on. Her shoes kicked up water. Her eyes stung.

Yet the school kept getting further and further away. With every step she took the danger receded. And while she was still certain that something, somewhere, still wanted her, it really seemed as if the booming beast would not have its meal. Gasping for breath, Keltie stopped on the sidewalk. A leviathan brooded in the distance, all black windows and crumbling red bricks. Yet nothing moved. The doors were closed and locked. She was safe.

"Okay," Keltie breathed. "Okay."

She broke into a light dog trot across Benedict Avenue. Gusts of rainy wind swept down from tall trees. Only here they no longer felt cold. They felt like the beginning of spring after a long, dead winter under ice. Keltie took a deep breath, relishing the flood of air in her lungs.

It was the last thing she remembered before hearing the truck horn.

How it came up so quickly, even under a silver downpour, she didn't know. The blast was long and loud, more hungry than alarmed. The cry of a beast that wanted to eat. Two bright eyes rushed at her. A grill of shimmering teeth bore down. Keltie felt the truck hit, but instead of sending her through the air, it dragged her under. A piercing squeal of brakes ripped through her brain as it came apart on the road. She screamed—

And woke up sweating in bed.

The room regarded her in dimly lit silence. Furniture dozed under dirty clothes. The Ben and Holly clock ticked.

"Jesus," Keltie let out. "Slaughter one vampire with a stake and now my sleep's probably

fucked up for life.”

She checked the clock; it read just shy of 4 AM. Time to get up and get dressed. Hit the road. Either that or wait here for Bolt to come and finish her off. Decisions, decisions.

Keltie put her feet on the floor. They didn't quite want to go, but she made them do it. She turned on a hot water plate for instant coffee and grabbed a Twinkie off the desk. As she ate it a knock came at the door. Marty.

“You're right on time,” she said to him, embarrassed not to be ready herself.

He smiled. “I'm not quite your typical Filipino in that regard.”

“I wouldn't know about it. Come in.”

Twelve: An Unpleasant Surprise (is there any other kind?)

They crept downstairs at 4:30 with packed bags. Outside, an ice cold February all but grabbed them by the throats and squeezed. Keltie paused on the front step to check the surroundings. A dead, frosted over world looked back. Icicles hung from tree limbs and eave spouts. Nothing moved.

"What are you looking for?" Marty asked.

Her reply was immediate. "Bolt."

"He's not here." But the voice next to her did not sound certain.

"I hope you're right," Keltie said.

Off they marched. No traffic passed them on Benedict Avenue, a fact for which Keltie was deeply grateful. She'd anticipated an occasional police car to force them back from the sidewalk and into hiding behind a hedge or a snowman or whatever. She even had a spiel planned out for just such an occasion. *Hello, officer, can you direct me to the nearest fucking sauna? I'm freezing my ass off out here.* Or something to that effect. But the need never arose. Perhaps the Norwalk cops were all freezing, too. Or somewhere eating Krispy Kremes.

All of that aside, she was by no means prepared to test their luck by entering the downtown district at five o'clock in the morning. At West Elm Street she bade they turn left, which led them around all the bars and convenience stores...and straight into, of all places, Pleasant Street Park.

"Oh shit," Marty said, staring at the creek from atop the hill. "Here again?"

Keltie touched his hand. "Last time. Promise."

They entered the park, never once looking left towards the gorge, or the giant culvert that ran under the street. A single arc-sodium lamp lit a shelter filled with old picnic tables.

There were a few high school kids already waiting at the Pleasant Street bus stop. Keltie wanted nothing to do with any of them. She told Marty to stay with her on the opposite side of the street, where a pit-bull behind a chain link fence threatened to tear them apart.

"It's safer and more friendly over here," Keltie explained, to which Marty only offered a strange look.

At the corner of West Main they parted ways. The plan was for Marty to pick up a car from his house, then drive to the Methodist church, where Keltie would be waiting. Also at the corner stood a large, Greek revival house, constructed around 1830. Its huge, dark windows shined on the empty sidewalks from within four handsome concrete columns. Once, during the 1830s, it had served as a seminary for girls, and two of the old chalkboards from that era were still in place on the living room wall. It was a fine house. A beautiful house, full of fireplaces and airy rooms. It was also the house of Mr. Bolt. Keltie had no way of knowing this, nor did Marty, and as luck would have it, the vampire was not in residence when the two teens paused to solidify their morning plans. For had Bolt been at home, he would have surely smelled the cigarettes on Keltie's breath, or perhaps caught a whiff of Vera's scent on Marty's clothes. From there, they both would have been killed on the spot. *What a lucky girl you are, Keltie*, Cameron sometimes used say, before slapping her to the floor, *to be alive in this WONDERFUL world. What a lucky, lucky girl.*

She kept her pace brisk as she headed towards town, though the air was almost too thin to breathe. Twice she slipped on the icy sidewalks, but was just too damned good to lose her balance. Or so she told herself. Up ahead stood the tower of the Methodist church. She

couldn't wait to get warm. Maybe Cameron would even have a pot of coffee going.

She was about to cross Newton Street when a police car flew to the stop sign. City of Norwalk Police Department, the badge on the passenger door declared. *Goddammit to fucking hell*, Keltie thought. For a moment she held hope that the cop would just drive off. And why not? It was a school morning. She was just another kid, walking to school. Right, officer? Come on, give a gal a break.

The passenger window purred down in its groove. "Hey there," the cop said, leaning over. "Where you headed this morning?"

Well, I'm done turning all my tricks for the night, officer, so I thought I'd go home and rinse my mouth out.

"Methodist church," she told him. "My dad works there as a janitor."

The cop nodded. "He giving you a ride to school?"

No, we also have a sexual thing going on. He takes pictures of me nude and then we upload on the Tor network.

"That's right," Keltie said. "His shift is almost done. It's a cold morning, so he hates for me to walk."

"All right," the cop replied with another nod. "Hop in and I'll take you to the church. Going that way anyway."

She got in as if she didn't have a choice (which she didn't) and they rolled off. In less than a minute drive was done. The cop let her out in the parking lot, then waited to make sure she actually went inside the church. *Bully for you*, Keltie thought, glancing back once at his purring cruiser.

No bald-headed priest greeted her today. Indeed, there was no one in the nave at all. She walked down the aisle like a bride who'd gotten the day of her wedding all wrong, eyes fixed on the altar cross, which seemed to glow with a heat far greater than the candles around it.

Suddenly uncertain, Keltie sat down in the pews. What if Cameron wasn't working today? And even if he was, how did she plan on explaining things to him?

Hey Dad? It's really great that we've reconciled, and I love you for it, but now I have to run off to this strange town with a guy you've never even met. Why? Just to torture some information out of a vampire. Yeah.

She looked at her hands for a moment, then back at the cross. Though she had read the bible, she did not consider herself a firm believer in God. Logic and science made for a far more dependable religion—or had, anyway, before all this Bram Stoker bullshit steamed into her station with its conductor waving a free ticket. Nevertheless, Keltie did know the Methodist prayer for forgiveness, and found herself whispering it now.

"Most merciful God, I confess that I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what I have done, and by what I have left undone. Especially troubling to me are the following sins..."

She paused. Now what? To be certain, the list would be long. Perhaps there weren't even enough hours in the day.

"Fuck," she whispered.

And a voice behind her replied: "Please tell me that isn't one of them."

She spun around to see Cameron seated calmly behind her. His glasses shimmered in a vaguely unsettling way. Last night's dream came back to Keltie, grinned, then disappeared.

"Either the school burned down and you're one of the lucky survivors," he went on, "or you're playing truant. Which is it?"

"Hi, Dad," Keltie said.

“Hey, baby.”

They stood and hugged. Tears began to well in Keltie’s eyes, which took all of her willpower to fight off. Their reason made sense. In a different time, in another life, she’d been taken away from this man, and was glad for the fact. Today she had to leave again, and felt anything but.

“So tell me,” he said as they sat back down, “why come to this godly place at such an ungodly hour? When I ran off from school at your age it was usually to a basement card game.”

“It’s a brisk morning, Dad. I wanted some clean air.”

“Now now. We’re not in a place for lying.”

She gave a laugh. “Are you sure? There’s a lot of wild stuff in the bible. Resurrection. Ten-headed monsters—”

“You know by now, Keltie, that impossibility is a myth.”

She looked at him. The candles still shimmered in his glasses, and for a moment she feared he was talking about Vera, or Penelope, or—God help them both—Bolt. But how could that be?

“I let you go once,” he continued, “and now I seem to have gotten you back. That’s pretty wild. Wild and wonderful.”

“I know,” Keltie said. “I’m sorry, Dad. I didn’t mean to make fun of anything.”

“Nah,” Cameron shrugged back. “I like to hear you laugh. It makes *me* laugh.”

“You’re not looking too cheerful, actually.”

It was the truth. Cameron Burke did not look ready to laugh at anything, or even smile. His face was forlorn as an old gravesite.

“It’s early,” he explained. “The coffee was weak.”

“Is that all it is?”

Another shrug came from the seat next to her. “I figure you’ve got something heavy on your mind. Otherwise why break out of school at five o’clock in the morning to come here?”

“Fresh donuts at Meek’s Pastry down the street. This is the best time for them.”

“Keltie.”

She smiled. “Come on. You said you like hearing me laugh.”

“You laugh now and you’re gonna look like Harley Quinn. That’ll frighten me.”

The remark puzzled her. For years Keltie had been dressing in a similar way to Dynamite Comics’ famous anti-heroine. Did her laugh, then, really remind Cameron of a better girl?

“Why did you come here this morning, sweetheart? Tell me.”

She took a deep breath. The smell of incense and pine cleaner filled her chest. “I met a boy,” she exhaled.

“Okay,” Cameron nodded. “What kind of a boy?”

“Well. He’s...”

Oh shit, girl, you are getting yourself in deeper and deeper here. What kind of a boy IS Marty, anyway? Good question, Dad.

“He’s...a nice kid. Pretty cool.”

Now her father finally laughed. “Brilliant. So you’re eloping with a nice kid who’s pretty cool. At sixteen years of age.”

“I didn’t say I was eloping. I mean yes!” she lunged, shocking Cameron so much that he jumped in his seat. “Yes! That’s it! We’re eloping! Cool, right?”

“Not cool, Keltie. Not in the least.”

Eloping, of course. What a great excuse. Much better than the one about running off to kill

vampires. How in hell did she ever think she could tell him the truth, anyway? It was madness. Foolishness. Absurdity at its absolute zenith.

"But I love him!" she spluttered.

"It was wrong to use that word anyway," Cameron said, ignoring her. "When you elope you don't tell anybody. It's supposed to be a secret."

"Not this time. I want the whole world to know how much I love him."

"I'm sure you do. Your heart is practically bursting from your chest."

"Dad!"

"How long have you known this kid?"

Keltie thought back. Technically, she had known Marty since the fifth grade. That made their relationship at least six years strong. Smiling, she decided to stick the number into Cameron's pipe and see what color smoke came out.

"Six years."

"Yeah," the old man retorted, in what she could have sworn was a green haze, "six years. So you saw him occasionally in the Pleasant Street School cafeteria. That's knowing him."

"It always used to make me tingle."

"I bet."

"So?" Keltie said, trying on her dad's shrug. "Do I have your blessing?"

"Go back to school, Keltie. You're being a bad girl."

"That's because I *am* a bad girl, Dad."

"No you're not," the other told her matter of factly. "You're a teenager, but not a bad girl."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're still learning. You grew up with a bad father, so you have that handicap to deal with. Your mom drank. *Drinks.*"

His mention of Chloe made Keltie squirm a little in her seat. She hadn't been back to the trailer park on Jefferson Street since their little two-woman soiree last year, or even bothered with looking at her contact number. *How are you doing these days, Mom? Still alive?*

"...all night long."

She blinked. "What was that, Dad? I'm sorry."

"I said I talk to your mom on the phone sometimes. She told me you came by her trailer last year. Stayed together a whole night."

"Yeah. We did."

"Was it fun?"

"Not especially."

"Don't tell her that when you see her again. She loved having you."

"I won't. Hey, Dad?"

Cameron's head tilted. His expression, open and receptive, made her feel like no matter what she did or didn't do with Marty, he would not try to stop her. He would ask, but he would not tell. Telling was what the old Cameron Burke used to do. Indeed, the old Cameron Burke would have back-handed her over the face and chained her in the basement before letting some boy woo her away with chocolates and flowers. This new man was either too old for tyranny or too repentant. Whichever, Keltie decided on the spot to let the whole matter of telling him about Marty drop. She had come here to say goodbye and that was all. The deed seemed more or less taken care of.

"I'll go back to school," she said, "think about this whole thing for awhile longer. How does that sound?"

Cameron grinned. "Like a lie. But I appreciate your trying to make me feel better."

"I can't get a single thing past you."

"Nope. Not this old man."

Marty's car turned out to be nothing if not practical. Keltie left the church to find a boxy, four-door sedan waiting at the curb. Marty waved from the driver's seat. Keltie jumped in on the other side and asked if he knew where the Sunset Lane trailer park was. He didn't, but it was a simple job of telling him the way as he drove. Five minutes later they were parked in front of Chloe's run down trailer.

"What's this?" Marty asked.

"My mom lives here. I just want to check up on her before we leave."

She got out, went to the door, rapped on it. The noise set off an immediate litany of dog barking from around the park, followed by a harsh warning that whoever was doing all the knocking better shut the fuck up. Keltie knocked harder.

"Mom? You in there?"

"Yup!" a muffled voice called back. "Hold on!"

A chain rattled, a lock turned. Moments later the door flew open on what Keltie considered the worst case of *worst-case scenario* she had ever seen. Chloe Burke teetered at the threshold, barely dressed and sloppy drunk. Her robe hung open at the top, showing far too much of what hadn't looked good for decades. Two eyes, shot with blood, fought for clarity below a helicopter crash hairdo where blades stuck out every which way but loose.

"Hi, Mom," Keltie said through a weak smile.

"Well, *hi Kelllltiiiiieeeeeee!*" her mom sang out. "It's really great to see ya! Come on in!"

"Actually—"

"And who is that handsome devil behind you?" Chloe went on, eyes rolling past Keltie's shoulder like a couple of broken marbles.

Keltie turned around. Marty had gotten out of the car and now idled by the rear-view mirror. His face did not look any more confident than she currently felt.

"That's...that's my friend, Marty," she said to Chloe.

"Mmmmm. Dishy."

"*Dishy?* Mom, have you been watching the BBC again?"

Without deigning to answer, the old woman began to insist in a voice far too loud for the surroundings that she and Marty both come inside for a drink.

"It's six o'clock in the morning, Mom," Keltie said.

Chloe groped for the door, missed, then found it on her second try. "Already?" she marveled.

"Yeah, Mom. Time really flies." She glanced at Marty again, who had not moved from his position next to the car. He raised his hands in a questioning manner. Keltie signaled for him to wait.

"Well how about some *pancakes* then?" Chloe burst out. "Come inside! I'll make you both two *huge* plates of...of..." And before she could finish, she pitched forward, spewing a deluge of vomit all over Keltie's boots.

"MOM!"

Keltie caught her up as more vomit sprayed onto her coat. She screamed back at Marty for help, but he was already there, and together, they carried Chloe into the trailer. To Keltie's further horror, a disgusting mess presented itself. Her mom's once perfectly clean residence had gone. In its place lay dirty laundry and used dishes. Stained carpeting. Stepping over all, they maneuvered Chloe into the bedroom, where further chaos lurked (junk jewelry was

strewn everywhere, along with several empty beer bottles), and got her onto the sheets just as the muscles in Keltie's arms were giving out.

"Mom? *Mom, are you okay?*"

"I'm okay," Chloe mumbled back. "I'm okay, I'm just sick, that's all. I got sick."

Keltie turned to Marty. She ordered him to find a rag and some clean water. He was off in a flash. "Mom?" she said, once they were alone. "I'm here."

"I'm sorry, Keltie. My tummy just hurts so bad."

Keltie tousled the old woman's hair, which felt brittle enough to crack. "I know it does," she whispered. "But we're going to fix you up. Okay? We're going to make you all better."

A smile broke across the tortured face on the pillow. "I used to say that to you. When you got sick."

"I remember. And you always did."

"Stop that. You don't have to be a good girl if you don't want to, Keltie. Not today."

Keltie blushed. "Better good than bad, Mom," she offered with a sick smile of her own.

"Is that what you really believe?"

Marty came through the door, holding a plastic bowl of steaming water. A white rag floated inside. Keltie washed her mother's face and shoulders as best she could.

"You need a hospital," she said.

Chloe's face became alarmed. "No, no. I don't want that."

"I don't blame you. But you need one."

It took some time, along with a great deal of persuasion, but Keltie's will was strong, and Chloe's body weak. After nearly an hour of cajoling she at last consented to be driven. An orderly put her into a wheelchair at the emergency entrance to Fisher-Titus Memorial Hospital. From there she was rolled in, and the waiting game for Keltie and Marty began.

She called the Methodist church on her cell phone. An office girl answered. In five minutes she was able to get Cameron on the line so Keltie could fill him in on the situation. He promised to be there within the hour. Keltie put the phone back in her bag and took a seat next to Marty in the waiting area.

"Is your dad coming?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good," he nodded. "Cool. Great."

They stayed until Keltie received news that Chloe was going to be all right. By this time Cameron had shown up. He hugged Keltie straightaway, then offered a polite nod and a handshake to Marty. Half an hour later a tall, lean doctor appeared to tell them all what had been obvious from the start: Chloe Burke had alcohol poisoning. Her stomach had been pumped. She'd been fitted with an IV and a catheter, and was now resting comfortably as she could in one of the rooms.

"Will she be okay?" Keltie asked.

"Yes," the doctor said, "that is...until she starts drinking again. Which she will. Has she ever undergone treatment for her problem?"

"She doesn't know she has a problem," Cameron cut in.

The doctor sighed. "Well I'm going to put you in touch with a general practitioner who can help. There are drugs she can prescribe for Ms. Burke's withdrawal. If, of course, she is willing to fight what's ailing her."

On that ominous remark, the doctor strode off to other sick rooms, leaving the three of them with no choice but to return to their plastic waiting chairs. Keltie and Marty did not wait long. They had ailments of their own to fight, of which Marty, over desultory talk with

Cameron, reminded Keltie through the use of nervous glances and fake coughs.

"Dad?" she said at last (the clock on her phone by now read 9:30). "Marty and I really need to get back to school."

"Yes," he replied, with a lack of hesitation that surprised her. "I suppose you do."

"Will you look after Mom until we get back?"

She winced inwardly as she spoke, knowing the question was unfair. But what other choices were there? Chloe had no one else.

"I will," Cameron promised. A crease formed over his brow. "Now...go on. Get your butts back to school."

Keltie leaned over to give him a kiss. "Thanks, Dad."

"Yeah. Sure. Oh, and Marty?"

"Yes, sir?" Marty said.

Cameron stared at him for what seemed to Keltie like a long time. "If anything happens to my daughter while you're away, I'll kill you. Understand?"

"Uh...yes, sir."

"*Dad!*" Keltie hissed.

And when Marty walked her back to the car, she felt she was being guarded with his life.

Thirteen: "All Rising To Great Place..."

"So what's the plan?" she asked as Marty made a right turn from the hospital parking lot. She wanted to stop thinking about Chloe for awhile, even if that meant discussing monsters and how one might kill you. Their route led south out of town, where a mass of dark clouds had built up over black trees in the distance.

"Howling is in Amish country," Marty told her, "off route 83. It'll take...oh, maybe forty-five minutes to get there."

"And then?"

"Then we drive to the residence of one Victor Unsichtbar."

"Wow. Now there's a name I wouldn't want to write in a greeting card."

"Well that's good, because according to Vera, he is not a man who moves one to poetry. Unless you like poems about raw meat and cannibalism."

Keltie's hands tightened on her knees. "I can't say either one of those are real turn-ons for me." *Oh, come off it, girl! You had a blast pounding that stake through Vera's heart!* "Shut up," she told herself.

Marty heard it. "I didn't say anything."

"I know. I was just thinking out loud. So this Victor guy eats people? Just like that thing me and Penny found at the Showboat?"

"So Vera says," Marty replied. "Or *said*. Once. He hunts mainly in Columbus and Youngstown. Large cities."

"Like Bolt."

"That's right. I suppose if he dined exclusively on Amish people he'd develop a fetish for wood crafting and lemonade."

"You're sick, man," Keltie said, cupping a hand over her smile. "Real sick."

"*Victor's sick*," the other came back with, in a tone that seemed to forbid all laughter. "And he'll make us sick, too, if he gets the chance. Or just flat out eat us both."

"How strong will he be in the sunlight?"

Marty indicated the clouds in the south. There was traffic coming the other way, but not much. Ice cold February mornings in Ohio were seldom fun to drive through. "What sunlight? We'll probably find this guy on his front porch, sipping blood from a sixteenth century goblet."

"So what the fuck are we doing this for, darling?" Keltie demanded to know.

And the reply that came from the other seat did nothing to alleviate her sudden incredulity. "He has information we need," Marty said.

"Oooh. You sounded like Ernst Blofeld just now. Except he normally worked with a plan."

"Don't worry. We're not just going to walk up and ring the doorbell."

"What then?"

"We need to take him by surprise. Then subdue him."

Keltie opened her mouth, shut it. Raised her finger, put it down. Marty's intentions were so stupidly optimistic she could not find the words to rebuke them. She tried again, this time with open mouth and raised finger together, when the first flakes of snow began to fall on the windshield. That sent her thoughts down a whole new track, at least for the time being.

"Does your radio work?" she asked, clicking it on before the other could reply.

"Ooooooooh-oooooooh-ooooooooh!" Smokey Robinson sang. "*Bayyybee, bayyybee!*"

She changed the channel.

"*Ice ice baby! Vanilla Ice ice baby!*"

Click! She changed it again.

"Baby you can drive my car! Yes I'm gonna be a star!"

"Goddammit," Keltie said, "where the hell's the weatherman when you need him?"

She switched over to the AM band and dialed around some more, but still had to wait until the top of the hour to get some news from one of the Cleveland stations. As was typical for that city, a veritable boatload of sports headlines came through first. Then came the national news, followed by politics. A dash of local fluff arrived next. Some silly old bitch's cat had gotten stuck in a tree in Shaker Heights; the silly old bitch climbed up the tree to get the cat and wound up stuck herself. With wearing patience, Keltie silently wished for the report to end with both woman and cat dead on the ground. But no joy.

"You'll be happy to know," the reporter chimed, "that it all ended well. The Shaker Heights Fire Department rescued the woman with no injuries reported. And now let's kick things over to Holly for the weather! Holly?"

"HEY!" a cheerful female voice exploded from the speakers.

"Jesus," Keltie plumed out, clutching her chest.

"GOOD MORNING, EVERYONE! I HOPE YOU'RE HAVING A WONDERFUL DAY SO FAR! IF YOU LOOK TO THE SOUTH YOU MAY BE WORRIED ABOUT SOME CLOUDS THERE, BUT DON'T BE. UNLESS, THAT IS, YOU PLAN ON TRAVELING THAT WAY..."

"Fuck," Keltie and Marty said together.

"IN WHICH CASE YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF IN SOME STORMY CONDITIONS. THOSE OF YOU FROM COLUMBUS ON DOWN TO THE BORDER CAN EXPECT THREE TO SIX INCHES OF SNOW TODAY. EWW, RIGHT?"

Keltie had heard enough; she snapped the radio off. "She sure is bubbly about bringing the bad news."

The snow remained light as Marty drove. Once they left Norwalk, open fields sprawled on either side of the car. A few familiar scenes swept past on Keltie's side, but not for long. Nor did it matter, for it all looked basically the same: silos, farmhouses, wheat fields. An old man climbed into a pick-up truck and slammed the door. A large sign—DUNHAM ORCHARDS—floated by. On the spot, Keltie began to daydream about what it might be like to be a farmer's wife. The countryside looked appealing, but she wasn't sure how good her apple pies would taste, or if she could get up at five o'clock every morning to feed the chickens.

Twenty minutes later they hit Wooster, a town that looked—to Keltie, at least—exactly like Norwalk. Business blocks from the mid 1800s stood along freshly tarred streets. Empty sidewalks led to shops whose signs were all but begging for business. Huge trees, creepy old houses.

Marty spied a McDonald's and suggested they get a drive-thru breakfast. He hadn't eaten, he said, since before dawn, and Keltie's own stomach had been grumbling since her curiosity about apple pies. They picked up a quick meal and left town via route 83. Here the trees—many of them large as the ones in Wooster—began to edge closer to Keltie's window. The snow kept falling, but not hard. It cupped inside the fallen leaves like sugar in corn-flakes.

"I was wondering when we'd see this," Marty suddenly said.

Snapped from her reverie, Keltie looked to see the back of an Amish buggy bouncing on the road. Marty pulled carefully around it, giving her a view of the buggy from the side. An old man held a pair of reins, not looking in her direction. A handsome chestnut Morgan, its eyes downcast, clopped grimly through the snow.

"I didn't see anyone in the back," Marty said, while Keltie watched both man and horse recede behind them. "Maybe he's out buying parts for farm equipment. Or delivering wood."

"What are the women doing, I wonder?"

To her surprise, he had an answer. "At this time of year? Catching up on the laundry or sewing. Or reading The Budget."

"What's that?"

"Amish newspaper."

Keltie looked back at the buggy, which was now little more than a dot in the rear window. It was an ice cold day. How were they staying warm back there?

"Wool coats and hot water bottles," Marty said, reading her mind.

"You sure know a lot about the Amish," she allowed.

"Not really. But it's easy to find articles about them in Ohio. If you look, that is," he added, as if Keltie were allergic to libraries.

"I read," she told him in a ruffled voice.

"I know," he said. "I can tell by the way you talk. Do you ever read about vampires?"

She shook her head. "No. But then I don't need to anymore."

"Why's that?"

"I've had a lot of on-the-job training of late."

The town of Howling looked haunted as hell.

There was no other way Keltie could think of to describe it. Near the outskirts of town the car began to jolt over a number of poorly done patches on the road. Dark, abandoned houses with broken windows leered across yellow lawns. Through Marty's window she could see a set of railroad tracks running parallel to a dirt lane cluttered with rusty box-cars.

WELCOME TO HOWLING, a slanted, shot up sign read, STAY AWHILE.

"Stayyyyyy foreverrrrr," Marty intoned.

An instant later they were overtaken by a black pick-up truck full of pimply teens. One of the teens scowled at Marty through the passenger window.

"Oh yeah," Keltie said, "I'd just love to stay awhile."

Five minutes later they arrived at a dreary, unkempt town square. A broken fountain looked down over weeds sprouting from cracked sidewalks. Nearby was a gas station, a city hall, and a dentist's office. Morbidly, Keltie wondered what it might be like to get a tooth pulled here. The idea made her think of medieval torture chambers in dank dungeons.

"Why are dentists allowed to chastise their patients?" she said aloud, reading a sign that did nothing to squelch her fear of extractions. DR. MANGLES, DDS.

Marty's reply sounded as if he were barely listening. "Dunno," he said.

"I mean, when a doctor at a hospital finds out you have cancer, he doesn't go: Shame on you for having cancer; it's your own fault."

"Uh...no, I would hope not. I guess if you have bad teeth, a dentist assumes you haven't been taking care of them."

"But it's not professional," Keltie insisted. "What if a person who didn't take care of his teeth when he was young wants to get himself fixed today? But he can't because the town dentist keeps being a dick?"

"Then he needs to go to another dentist," Marty said.

He still didn't sound fully attentive, so Keltie let the subject drop. They were away from the square by then, traveling down a narrow street of dilapidated houses. Keltie watched a stray cat pounce on something in high grass. She waved at a little kid on a Big Wheel; the little kid gave her the finger.

"Great town," she murmured.

"Oh, I could live here."

"You'd better not mean that."

They turned off the narrow street, rounded a few more corners, and were then presented with what Keltie could only assume was Howling's upper-class district. The street was much wider here, the houses larger and far more old. White pillars and decorative eaves were set back everywhere amongst mighty trees that resembled the ones back home.

"This is the street where he lives," Marty informed her.

She wasn't sure whether to be pleased about that or not. The houses outside her window were all well-kept. Their lawns stretched widely from hedgerow to hedgerow. Someone looking down from a second floor would have no trouble spotting two out-of-towner teens skulking around back stairs.

On a sudden thought, Keltie asked: "Did you happen to bring any garlic or wooden crosses?"

"A cross," the other answered with a nod. "And a stake and hammer are in the trunk."

She blinked. "So we're going to kill this guy?"

"Not before he tells us about Bolt."

"I still don't know what your plan is, Marty. When are you going to tell me?"

He might have answered her then, but for one thing: They had arrived.

Marty stopped in front of a house that shared many features with the others around it. It was large; it was old. Keltie knew very little about architecture, but guessed that this one fell into the Queen Ann category. Blank windows glared down from an uneven facade made up of towers and terra-cotta roofing. A dark, shadowy porch, all unwelcoming, snoozed over an unmowed lawn.

"This is not the house we want, is it?" she asked, sickened by the very idea of having to enter the place.

"I'm afraid so," came Marty's inexorable reply.

"Why does it look so much more damned scary than the rest?"

He looked at her like she was stupid. "Because a vampire lives here, darling."

"*Darling.*" She smiled. "I like that. You have my permission to keep using it. But Marty"—her gaze went back to the house—"I don't think anyone lives here."

Evidence lay everywhere to support the idea. The porch sagged, and even from this distance Keltie could make out peels of paint curling from the door, the window sills. Blades of dead grass swayed under a breeze that grew more steady by the minute.

"The driveway's empty," she pointed out, "and I don't see any curtains in the windows."

Yet Marty would not be moved. "This is the house," he said. "Vera described it perfectly."

Keltie opened her door. The crisp breeze, snow laden, swept up her legs, ruffling the hem of her skirt. It felt good to breathe, however, especially after sitting next to the car's stuffy heater for so long. She inhaled greedily, stretching the small yet sturdy lungs she owned, until Marty got out and approached the house's front gate.

"Don't do that," she called. "If the guy is in there, there's a good chance he'll see you." *In fact, what the hell were you thinking when you pulled right up in front of his house, knucklehead?*

"We'll go around the back," a now sheepish-looking Marty decided.

"Good idea."

Pretending to be confident, he set off down the walk, snow swirling around his feet. Keltie remained put. She let him get about twenty yards from the car, then called out to him again, this time to ask if he might be forgetting something. Marty stopped, turned around. His head

tilted in a way that reminded her of a dog trying to understand its master.

Grinning, she told him: "Stake. Hammer."

His hand slapped his forehead. "Okay, I'm not off to a good start here."

Once the tools were out of the trunk—and safely stashed inside Keltie's leather jacket—they walked to the back of the house, keeping their gait casual but their eyes and ears sharp. The backyard treated them to a scene every bit as derelict as the front. Dead grass, dead trees, broken steps. A gnarly, ratted noose swayed from one of the trees, making Keltie's skin crawl. Beneath another lay the body of a doll, its eyes scratched out, its hair matted.

"All right," she whispered to Marty, "I'm convinced. This is the right house. Now what?"

"Porch," he said, putting an arm around her waist.

They went up the broken steps. One of them gave under Keltie's boot. Marty caught her before she could fall.

On the porch they saw an empty socket where the button for a doorbell had once been. Marty pulled back a screen, then turned a rusty knob. To Keltie's surprise, the door creaked open. Marty stepped inside first, holding his cross out like Roddy McDowell in an old vampire movie Keltie had watched as a girl. She stuck close to his back. Now that they were actually inside the house, she found she was pretty much afraid of everything her eyes happened to land on.

They were in a living room—or what had once been a living room in maybe the 1890s. Its two key features, wood and dust, assaulted Keltie, the latter almost caustic in its harshness. In front of them yawned a flight of stairs with a majestic banister; on the right, a rolled up carpet lay against a stained wall; to the left was an archway that let on another room.

"I vote we go up," Marty whispered.

"Fine. Any particular reason?"

"All rising to great place is by a winding stair."

"Those steps don't wind, Francis."

"Nah," he agreed, "but they do bend."

"Kind of like me at the moment, dear. I'm beginning to bend like hell."

They went up. The musty odor continued to attack, growing stronger with every step. Keltie began to wish she'd taken a nice, deep breath outside and held it in. She coughed, shook her head, coughed again.

The walls on the second floor were pale yellow, and stained with graffiti. Several open doors invited them down the hallway, though Keltie felt no real wish to take them up. Faint shadows lay dead on rotten floorboards. Marty's shoe kicked an empty bottle, sending it twirling over a minefield of mouse poop.

The first door let on a bathroom too disgusting to linger in. Across the hall was a bedroom with a bare mattress (*sans* bed frame), and a hotchpotch pile of old girly magazines.

"Ech," Marty groaned. "Look."

He was pointing down at one of the magazines. A nude blonde girl smiled back, her legs spread wide.

"Too easy for you?" Keltie asked, amused by his distaste.

"Too hairy. She's got a national forest growing down there."

"Yeah. Well, times change."

"Thank God. Let's check the other rooms."

But they only got to one more before all hell broke loose. It was decorated much like the previous: a bare mattress, some reading material. On one of the walls, however, there was horror. Seeing it forced a gasp from Keltie (followed immediately by more coughing). Marty's

whole frame went rigid. "Wow," he breathed. "Just...wow."

"What is it, Marty?"

"A gorgon. I think."

Rarely had she seen anything painted with such disturbing intricacy. Done mainly in shades of red and brown, it took up the entire wall: an enormous, demon-like face that scowled on the neck of what appeared to be a dog's body. Its forehead, nested over with thick, black brows, jutted over yellow eyes almost too deep to escape. Painted near the hairline was the stump of a broken horn, where Keltie could actually see, by love of the artist's hand, individual granules of mineral where the horn had snapped loose.

"It's too much," she said, looking at the dog's body now, its heavy black fur so detailed it might have been painted one strand at a time. "Too much."

"It's only a picture."

GET ME OUT OF YOUR HEAD, a line next to the gorgon commanded.

With pleasure, Keltie thought, just as Marty read the words aloud and explained that the artist, driven by whatever lunatic ideal in command of his thoughts at the time, more than likely meant for the beast to be set free from imagination.

"And released upon...what?" she asked. "The real world?"

"Correct."

"Jesus Christ."

"Not in here," a third voice spoke from behind, and Keltie shrieked.

If the wall gorgon left any lingering doubts as to whether or not this house was crazy, then the figure who now stood in the doorway obliterated them with chilling ease. It was slender, and looked to stand just over six feet in height. Yet these were guesses only, for it wore a black hood on its face, along with a flowing robe of the same color on its body.

"Good morning," Marty said, sounding like an idiot. "We're sorry to trespass. We're looking for someone. A Mr. Unsichtbar."

The robed man's eyes peered at them through two holes that looked to have been cut by a child. "What do you want with him?" the man demanded to know.

"We're census takers. We just wanted to confirm that the gentleman is still a resident of this city."

One of the man's hands went into his robe, and emerged slowly with a long knife. Immediately, Keltie stepped behind Marty, clutching his shoulders. Things were way, way off the beaten track of their plan now. *What are we going to do?* her mind gibbered. *What are we going to do?*

"There's nobody here by that name," the man said, raising the blade. "I've never even heard of him."

"Oh," Marty replied. "Pity."

"For you guys, it is."

Keltie thought she heard a swallow come from Marty's throat. "You're not really going to stab us, are you?" he asked.

"Oh no. At least I don't think so."

"*Whew!* I'm really glad to hear you say that. Listen—"

"We're going to tie you both up to stakes and burn you alive." Turning his head briefly, the man called five more robed bodies into the room, all of them masked, and all of them very tall. "You came here looking for trouble," the man accused.

"No—" Marty began.

"And you found it. Congratulations."

Keltie could maintain her silence no more. Poking her head from behind Marty, she begged: "Who are you?"

The man raised his black-cloaked arms, his blade catching a gleam of winter light through the window. Dimly, Keltie was aware the snow was falling harder outside, and over the past few minutes the room had darkened. "We," the man pronounced with a flourish, "are known as The Satanist Group Association."

"The *what?*"

"You heard me."

Silence settled over everything. Keltie felt stunned. Flabbergasted. Never in her life had she heard a more ridiculous name for a faction. She wanted to laugh, except the men blocking the door were big, and in all probability, each of them carried a knife like their leader.

Marty, meanwhile, had begun slowly shaking his head. "Satanist. Group. Association."

"Correct," the man nodded. "And you're going to die. Both of you. Today."

This last was added as if he expected Keltie and Marty to ask for some sort of time-table. A quick glance towards the window told Keltie it was no escape, for while the snow had indeed strengthened (along with the wind, which shook the pane as she looked away), offering cushion for a desperate jump, the sash was closed, and appeared far from cooperative.

"Marty," she whispered, near tears, "what are we going to do?"

Before he could answer, the Satanists closed in.

Fourteen: Stakes and Matches

They were taken down to the basement. Three of the Satanists walked behind them, three in front. On the way, Marty asked again whether anyone had heard of Victor Unsichtbar. Once again he was told—by all six captors this time—that such a man had never crossed the threshold of this house.

“And if he shows up,” the man with the knife went on, “he’ll die just the same way as you.”

“Aren’t you worried about the police?” Marty then wanted to know.

The man’s reply stifled all ability for reasoning: “I actually work in the donut shop when I’m not doing this. We’re tight with the cops.”

They walked down a flight of creaky basement steps. Naked bulbs glowed from a ceiling strewn with cobwebs. But it was the floor that sent Keltie’s heart into a newly panicked sprint. It was earthen, and quite moist. Her boots sank in it. It would be easy, thus, to erect two of the long, wooden stakes she saw lying next to a dormant water heater. They would sink as far down as the Satanists needed them to go.

“This is a misunderstanding,” she explained, though she knew the futility of it. “That’s all. A misunderstanding.”

“I agree,” the knife man said. “Now pick up one of those stakes. We’re going outside.”

“Outside?”

“Yes.” His black hood tilted. “Unless you’d rather die down here?”

Keltie stepped forward. The stakes were long, crude, and looked very heavy. She knelt, grabbed hold the wood. Her arms flexed, bulged. The stakes were indeed heavy; she could barely get one to move. Gasping in a breath, Keltie tried again. The stake moved a little more. She thought she might be able to carry it, but not for long.

“Here,” Marty said, kneeling next to her. He took a stake in each hand and stood up.

Keltie looked at him. “You are going to carry my stake for me?” she marveled. “How chivalrous. Next time I die, I hope you’re around.”

Outside, the wind shoved them. Keltie was knocked backward a step, while two of the Satanists scrambled to keep their hoods on. Meanwhile, the back lawn had become a tundra. Ice gleamed in the dead grass; snowflakes sharp as cutting blades screamed through the trees. Keeping her head down, Keltie fought the tempest as best she could. They began walking towards a line of trees at the far end of the lawn.

She tried hard to think of a way to escape. A pitiful, pathetic thimble of possibilities emerged. She could run. Simply turn and dash off. In weather like this it might even work. Keltie didn’t know how long she could outlast these crazy people in a sprint, but what did that matter? They would lose their masks, trip over their own robes. And in the time they got their shit together and finished yelling at each other she’d be gone. Marty, on the other hand, might not fair so well. Anything could and probably would happen to him while she busied herself with fetching the police.

And then there was the stake and hammer inside her coat. What good might they do for such *chance medlee* as this? Likely not much. Against a willing target, Keltie had surprised herself: She had pounded a stake through Vera’s chest until the woman literally burst into flames. The Satanists would not be so passive. Far from it. Dumb they just might be (against all reason, she kept wanting to laugh at that Satanists Group Association name), but too weak to defend themselves against a girl with a stick?

They passed into the woods. Trees now swayed in heavy winds. Keltie looked back. With

ever increasing dread, she saw the house getting further and further away. It reminded her of the dream she'd had the other night. There, she'd also been moving away from a scary building, albeit with a sense of comfort, of escape. This time around—

"Stop," the knife man said. "Stop!"

They all stopped. The area looked unremarkable to Keltie. Chosen at random. There were no gruesome statues leering down from blackened pedestals, no weird hieroglyphics etched in the dirt. There were just trees, and wind, and snow.

"Did anyone bother to text Rick?" the knife man said.

One of the other Satanists raised a tentative hand.

"Fine. So let's get to work."

They erected the stakes clumsily, and with much bickering as to who was supposed to do what. The one meant for Marty fell over twice as his arms were being tied to it. The knife man cursed at them, told them to work faster, to do better. Either they didn't hear him or they were already doing their level best. Whichever, Keltie was grateful to have this icy storm impede the progress of her doom. Over the past few minutes the snow had become almost too heavy to see through. She shivered like a wet dog as one of the Satanists tied her to the stake, while another threatened to stab her should she make any sudden moves.

"Finished yet?" Knife man yelled over the storm.

Keltie now felt like a witch from the seventeenth century trials. The stake, with her arms tied behind it, ran straight up her back, and two more of the Satanists were busy piling kindling at her feet. Ah, death. The storm had kept it at bay, but it couldn't be far off now. She and Marty were going to die, courtesy of probably the stupidest bunch of idiots she had ever encountered. It wasn't fair. What the hell kind of god allowed such shit to happen?

Their kind, girl, their kind.

A man dressed in a hockey mask and a green jumpsuit appeared. Keltie rolled her eyes. Here was the icing on the cake. The seventh psycho had arrived.

"Rick!" Knife man called. "Great to have you here, bud! Ready to roast some marshmallows?"

Rick stared silently through his mask.

"Great!" Knife man said. "Cool! Did you bring matches?"

Rick went on staring. Keltie supposed it could have been worse: Rick could have been carrying a machete. Or maybe a two-by-four.

"Rick? Buddy? We're all really cold here, so let's get this show on the road."

Slowly, Rick reached into his jumpsuit and brought out a box of Guitar matches. Several of the Satanists *ooh'd* and *ahh'd*. Guitar matches. Damn, you couldn't do better than those. As if he understood this, Rick walked to Marty's stake and showed him the box.

Marty gave him a nod. "Yeah. Those kick ass. I'm sure to go up like a Roman candle now."

At that instant a massive gust of wind swept through the trees. Keltie's stake tilted forward. She screamed, but the wind screamed harder. Rick staggered, fell down...and was immediately crushed under a massive tree branch from somewhere high above.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" somebody yelled, as the wind screamed some more.

Six black robes made a mad dash for cover. Keltie could barely see them now, but it made no difference. She thought they would go back to the house, wait out the storm, and then return to finish what they'd started. No way did she intend for them to have that satisfaction. Desperately, she began twisting her hands, left and right, right and left. Yet once again her muscles were not equal to the challenge. No matter how hard she tried, the ropes held.

"Help!" she cried into the snow. "Somebody help!"

"Right here," Marty said.

He'd materialized next to her, a tall, dark shape in the frenzied white. His hands found Keltie's wrists and untied them with a few quick tugs. The sudden release caused her to stagger forward, straight into his arms, which caught her up easily and drew her close.

She was happy to hold on. Arms locked around his neck, Keltie raised her legs, indulging the sanctity of his embrace. Marty had no trouble lifting her, or providing warmth to her rattled bones. His lips went to her ear, asked if she was okay. She told him yes. Then she noticed Rick beginning to stir under the fallen branch.

"Should we help him?" she asked, after pointing him out to Marty.

His answer was cold as the snow: "No way in hell."

"Then please let's get out of this place."

Using the woods (and the storm) for cover, Marty led them in the direction he felt would best go back to his car. The journey proved difficult. Once an ally in their plight, the weather now seemed intent on freezing them to death. Keltie did her best to stick close to Marty, giving him what heat her body had to offer, but several times he had to stop to regain his bearings while the wind continued to shriek, hurling snow and twigs—and the occasional heavy branch—directly at them.

"*Dammit!*" he yelled. Then: "*Can you even see?*"

Keltie could. She pointed past his shoulder towards a patch of white that looked a shade brighter than the rest. She guessed it had to be a break in the trees. Either that or a gateway off the edge of the earth. Keeping their eyes fixed on this target, they trudged on, until at last the trees fell back. Keltie's boot struck something hard beneath the snow; she had time to register it as concrete before slipping backward. Once more, Marty caught her, and it was a good thing, for suddenly she could no longer stand on her own. She'd been through a lot today. Truckloads by ordinary standards. A brush with the police, a sick mother who needed hospital care, a long drive. Spooky houses, crazy people dressed in black. Bondage to a wooden stake, a flirt with death. And now the storm—the cold, brutal storm that would not let up, even as a transformer over Keltie's shoulder blew and spit sparks down on their heads.

"*Marty!*" she screamed. "*Oh my God! Oh my God!*"

"*I've got you!*"

Gasping for air (it was too cold to breathe in; her lungs felt like popsicles), Keltie felt her legs lifted off the ground. She reached out to lock her arms about his neck. His shoulder was there, too, where she happily buried her face, dreaming of her next wish, which involved tropical beaches and funny-sounding drinks dressed with plastic umbrellas.

"*Go!*" she commanded.

"*Where?*"

"*I don't care! Just GO!*"

Somehow he made it back to the car. Keltie did not look up even once to check on his progress. The task of staying awake and coherent had monopolized the market. He got her into the back seat, ran around to the front and started the engine. Soon after that, heat began pouring into the compartment. By then Marty, too, was in the back seat, and Keltie had her head in his lap, waiting for her bones to thaw.

"Fucking...maniacs," she said, once her teeth stopped chattering.

All the car's windows were caked with snow, leaving them with only the dome light to see by. Not that Keltie needed to see. Barring a collision with one of Howling's snowplows, they were safe for the time being. Safe and warm.

Are we, girl? There might be crazies still in the house nearby, and then Rick, the Guitar match hero, squirming under a branch somewhere.

She looked at Marty, who had not needed matches of any kind to be a hero today. He was stroking her hair in an absent way (and a rather pleasurable way), his eyes on nothing at all, his thoughts...who knew?

"Hey, Mister," she said, smiling. He looked down and tilted his head. "You're pretty good at rescuing damsels in distress. Do they give classes on it in the boys' wing?"

Blushing, he said: "Well, we're not quite out of the mess yet."

"I know. The house is only about a hundred yards off. But I don't think anyone will coming looking for us until the snow stops."

"Once it does we'll need to leave," he nodded. "Find somewhere to hole up until they get the roads plowed."

She looked out the window, half hoping that a hotel would magically appear before her eyes. The storm would have none of it. Even with the heater running, snow clung to the glass, thick as a quilt. All they could do was wait.

Not much later, Marty asked if he could turn on the radio. Weather bulletins, none of them promising, vibrated the speakers. The storm had actually made its way north and now threatened Cleveland. Keltie laughed. Long ago, another boy named Marty had once asked: Since when can weathermen predict the weather? His question no longer sounded sarcastic.

"What's so funny?" the Marty sitting with her wondered.

And so she told him, and they got to talking about their favorite movies for awhile. Mean Girls remained at the top of Keltie's list. Charmed was another. For Marty, the answer turned out to be surprising.

"Fright Night," he told her. "The old one."

She gawped up from his lap. "No way. Seriously?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

To judge by the look he gave, she was silly for even asking. "Keltie," he said, "darling. Baby. Sweetheart..."

"Ooh, go on. I want to hear all of this."

He stroked her hair again before saying: "A master vampire gets killed at the end of it. He gets killed...and his flesh falls off from his bones."

"Good point," she said, filling her chest with a deep breath under his touch. "Good point."

Fifteen: Bolt Investigates

Though the weather was cold—cold enough to freeze nose hairs—Bolt demanded that Lloyd accompany him to Pleasant Street School. He gave two reasons for this. The first: He needed a lookout to watch the halls for what he called *peepers and creepers*. “Dickheads, basically,” Bolt went on to explain, “who can’t keep their goddamned business where it belongs.” The second reason was really more of a response to the old man’s whining about the weather: “For Christ’s sake, Lloyd, the school’s only a block down the street! Where’s your pecker?” Standing inside the front door of the Wooster-Boalt home, Lloyd had glanced down as if to assure himself that his pecker was still where it belonged, then reached for his scarf. “Atta boy,” Bolt said. “I love you, Lloyd. You’re the best.”

Shoes crunching in road salt, they walked across West Main Street to South Pleasant. It was just after 7PM, but the sidewalks were already empty. No one in Norwalk wanted anything to do with this frigid February. But for the vampire and his servant, the world all around was deathly quiet.

“Lovely evening,” Bolt said, strolling along like a master of all he surveyed (and wasn’t he exactly that?).

“I beg to differ, My Lord,” came the butler’s shaky reply.

“We’re almost at the school.”

They crossed the parking lot—icy, treacherous—to reach the entrance to the gymnasium. Here Bolt was forced to make Lloyd wait a few minutes while he flew to the roof and entered the school through a small trap-door that let on the attic. From here it was a simple matter of going to the office to disable the alarm, then back to the gym to let Lloyd inside.

“Could you have taken any longer with all of that shit, My Lord?” the butler asked, shivering in the gym’s foyer.

Bolt flushed. “My bad, Lloyd. I haven’t been here in awhile. Vera usually reports direct.”

“I know that, My Lord. I let her in each time she visits.”

Now he scowled at the old man. “So what are you bitching about? Let’s go.”

That Vera had failed to report had been no great hardship to Bolt at first. The newspaper article about the cigarette-smoking juvenile’s disappearance pleased him well enough to assume things were fine. At first. But now it was Tuesday night, and Vera’s whereabouts—along with her report—were still unknown. The time had come for proactive measure.

Lloyd clicked on his flashlight. The beam danced across masonry walls decorated with crayon drawings, lunch menus, and the occasional trophy. None of it interested Bolt in the slightest. His cloak fanned open like a wing as he swept across the gym with eyes fixed on the stage—or rather, the basement door in back of the stage. A single, elegant leap had him up to where the students sometimes did holiday plays. His boots clicked on polished wood, sending echoes over the gym. He heard Lloyd call for him to wait, and turned to see the old man gingerly climbing a set of stairs on the right.

“What if she’s not here, My Lord?” he asked. “It is feeding time, after all. I surmise she’s out with the rest of the undead, having a jolly good time scaring up dinner. Or perhaps simply tearing the heads off innocent young virgins.”

“Perhaps,” Bolt said, after a long look in the other’s direction. “But as you well know, Lloyd, I don’t need your flashlight to see.” He gestured towards the back of the stage. “Shine it there. You’ll notice the basement door is ajar.”

Lloyd’s beam went to the door, which was indeed open about six inches off the frame,

baring cold blackness. "Oh no, My Lord."

"Oh yes. Something's afoot."

"My Lord?"

"Afoot, Lloyd. Strange. Wrong. Off-center. We need to find out what."

"Very good, My Lord."

Bolt grimaced. "Very good? I bet you're the kind of guy who clicks *like* on Facebook when he sees a picture of a car crash, am I right?"

"No, My Lord. I'm a cat person."

"How original. Let's go."

They were not halfway down the steps before Bolt knew what happened. He froze and asked Lloyd if he smelled anything funny. But of course the old man didn't. He couldn't see in the dark, or jump on top of buildings...or smell burned vampire flesh from across a musty basement. Following his nose now, Bolt went to the bottom of the stairs, then found his way to the back wall, where rested an open, charred coffin. Inside were the remains of Vera. They didn't amount to much. There was a grinning skull, a rib-cage. A femur, a pelvis. Pitiful. Vera had been a strong vampire. Better than the average bear, especially considering her youth. She could have been great; she could have been a master. What a terrible waste.

"Too young," Bolt uttered, frowning down at the cadaver. "Too young."

Seconds later Lloyd joined him. A gasp escaped his throat. "My Lord! Is this...is this Miss Calinga?"

Bolt watched his light dance on the bones. "Yes," he answered.

He could think of nothing else. Except for perhaps one thing: Keltie Burke had killed three of his vampires in less than a year. Two of them had been mighty—over a hundred years old.

"What does that mean?" he asked the skull.

Was she good? Did the girl possess a natural skill for survival Bolt had hitherto never known? Or was she just damned lucky?

Vera's skull had nothing to say on the matter. It went on with its grin and its vacuous stare. Bolt waited anyway, willing it to answer.

"You've got quite a heady bitch on your hands."

"Indeed," Bolt said. "Indeed I do, Lloyd."

The servant's flashlight beam had found its way to the floor, illuminating the stake and hammer Keltie had presumably used to create this mess. After a moment's pause Bolt knelt, picked them up. His eyes studied them. Each looked crude and heartless. They were covered in tacky blood, which should have meant fingerprints, but apparently Keltie had been wearing gloves of some kind. Bah! She was still a stupid girl. Careless. Even now Bolt could smell her cigarettes—a faint odor, but one unmistakable as the peppermint she sometimes used to cover it up. Stupid, careless, and untidy. All of these described Keltie Burke. Oh, and of course...

Bolt smiled. "Heady bitch. Good one, Lloyd."

"Yes, My Lord."

"Let's check Vera's old house. Maybe her family knows how Keltie found this place. If they do, we kill them. And then"—he raised the stake and hammer—"we kill Keltie. With these."

"Very good, My Lord."

"But not fast." In the shadows, Bolt's smile became a grin, causing his servant to take a hesitant step back. "Slowly, Lloyd. Oh, so slowly."

Weapons in hand, he turned to leave, but not before a large, brown spider scuttled from under Vera's coffin. Bolt heard it, saw it...and then stepped down, crushing it to death.

Sixteen: Love (or something like it)

Finding a place to park off the street was no easy chore (five inches of snow had already fallen, and the town's fleet of plows amounted to exactly one truck), but Keltie insisted it be done before she and Marty went in search of a place to lay their weary heads. Grumbling his displeasure, the Filipino crawled behind the wheel, only to find that he couldn't see well enough to drive and had to get out to brush snow off the windshield. Keltie made a show of stretching out in the backseat, lacing her hands behind her head until Marty became visible through the glass, at which point she smiled and waved.

"Atta boy!" she yelled. "Brush that snow!"

Such brazenness might have earned the middle finger treatment from other boys; Marty only grinned and stuck his tongue out. Once back inside, he wondered aloud where they were going to put the car. All of Howling had been whited out. If they wandered for too long, he warned, he might wind up driving over a curb, or into a ditch. Keltie bit her lip. Half a dozen ideas—all of them terrible—popped into her head. Her legs, still stretched in the back seat, bent at the knees. For a moment she caught him admiring the view and was happy. She realized that besides saving her life, he had done something else for her today as well: re-awakened a long dormant sexual desire.

"Just park it right in the driveway here," she said, jerking her thumb towards Unsichtbar's mansion. "Then get in the back with me." A grin spread across her face. "Now."

Marty opened his mouth to answer. What he might have said didn't matter, because Keltie knew the idea was silly on the spot.

"Wait," she interrupted, "never mind. Much as the thought appeals to me, we can't do it."

"Let's drive around the block," Marty brought out. "Maybe we'll come across something."

"Don't get us stuck."

He didn't get them stuck. In spite of all the crazy shit God had thrown at him, today was apparently the kid's day. He skidded and slid the car down to the corner, hung a left, and found, of all things, a bed and breakfast with a convenient little driveway next to it.

HOWLING MANOR, a green sign with yellow lettering proclaimed from the lawn, *ROOMS AND RECREATION. SPEND THE NIGHT IN ANOTHER TIME!*

The house looked tremendous, though Keltie did not dawdle long in the cold to admire it. Giant windows lit with gold shined beneath icicle eaves. She and Marty mounted a large porch. A red door with a wreath greeted them. Marty opened it on a room bathed in the warm, yellow light of several oil lamps placed along walls of paneled oak. A staircase, carpeted red, coiled behind a heroic, wooden receiving desk. An antique cash register decorated the desk. And next to that...

"No one," Keltie said, peering around. There was a wall clock, ticking pleasantly. A shelf of books. Some paintings. An ottoman. "Though I guess that sign wasn't kidding about being in another time."

"Lots of old-looking stuff," Marty agreed. "I like it."

He rang a bell on the desk. A muffled voice, telling them to please wait, called from upstairs. Seconds later a thin, bald man in blocky glasses arrived to check them in. Here Keltie became nervous about how they were going to pay for their night at the manor (which so far looked very expensive), but her worries dissolved when Marty took a credit card from his wallet. For a moment she wondered whether or not he'd stolen it. Then a strong gust of wind hit the window, and she decided it didn't matter. No one was going to come looking for

two escaped juveniles in this crazy weather. Even the bald man seemed not to care who they were. With a friendly nod, he took the card from Marty and scanned it. Then he escorted them up the lushly carpeted stairs.

The hallway at the top was much, much prettier than the one Keltie had seen at Unsichtbar's house. Gold lamps shined from quaint little end tables, some with flowers, some without. The man showed them into a masculine-looking room of dark curtains and even darker wood. A four-poster bed, the biggest Keltie had ever seen, dominated the floor. Another clock ticked on the wall, next to a writing desk with a naked chair.

"Wow," she gushed, "this is really nice."

The man looked pleased. "Thank you. My wife and I spent years restoring the house. There's a complimentary breakfast in the morning. We also have a library, if you like to read."

"Perfect," Marty said.

Once they were alone in the room, Keltie went to the door and locked it. She hung her coat, with stake and hammer still inside, on the chair. Her bones ached. It had been a day of victories and defeats, both of which took their toll on her strength. The four-poster, with its deep blankets and soft pillows, beckoned. Keltie took a seat on the mattress. She slid off her boots as Marty sauntered over to the window for a look outside.

"Getting dark," he said. "Barely past one o'clock and already getting dark."

"I hope no one comes looking for us," she replied, more for something to say than out of any actual concern. She didn't want to discuss the police right now, or vampires, or Satanists or whatever. "A long, hot bath is in order. This place better have a tub."

"What if Bolt comes? If Vera was right about Unsichtbar he might track us here."

Keltie acted like she didn't hear. She stood up and, looking straight into his eyes, began to unbutton her top.

"Keltie?"

She laughed. He'd played Superman twice today; now, suddenly, he couldn't recognize Lois Lane. The blouse slipped from her shoulders. She placed it on the bed before walking, fawn-like, to close her arms about his neck. It was a reach. A wondrous, blissful reach. Keltie felt she could hang from him like an ornament, so handsome was his build. Marty hesitated for only a moment, then his arms enveloped her, drew her in, to let Keltie stand on tip-toe for a kiss, which she accepted greedily, clawing at his hair between desperate gasps for breath. His fingers found the clasp of her brassiere, fumbled, unclipped it. Cool air found Keltie's breasts, sharpening the nipples even further.

"Yes, baby," she whispered in between kisses. "Oh my God, yes."

Marty lifted off his own shirt, giving her a nice, wide frame of dark skin to indulge. Her fingers stroked his chest. She heard it fill with air—a low, powerful breath—and then her body was being slowly turned round, so that Marty's hands could reach from behind and take hold of her breasts. A much softer, much higher, much prettier breath flooded her own lungs, but they did not hold it for long. Who could blame them? She was beneath the surface of his masculinity, and being dragged deep. Air was not a luxury. Nor did she wish it to be.

Marty let one of his hands stray from her breast to clasp hold of her throat. Silently, Keltie dared him to squeeze. Meanwhile his other hand worked its way down to the belt of her skirt and plunged underneath. His fingers found the band of her panties, crawled under that too, and invaded her vagina.

"Marty!" she cried. "Marty!"

She fell backward. The wall of his body caught her up. Confident that it would continue to bear her weight, Keltie opened her legs wide, allowing him even more access down below.

Now one of his fingers curved around the groin and pressed on her other, smaller hole until it got inside. Keltie's eyes fluttered open. She was somewhat hesitant about letting him explore this region of her body (what if something messy happened?), but though the sensation was strange she found it pleasurable enough to let him continue. Wise decision, for it allowed the hard bone of Marty's palm to become wedged against her clitoris, forceful enough to make Keltie's knees buckle in ecstasy.

"Yes! Yes, that's it, baby!" Then, in near total lack of self-control, she screamed: "Choke me! Choke me!"

He obliged. The plea was barely out of Keltie's mouth when she felt her windpipe squeezed hard enough to block almost all air from getting through. She gagged, opening her mouth wide as it would go for a breath. Her hands flew to take hold of Marty's hand, but he was far, far too strong. There was simply no budging it, no getting it to come free.

Harder! the crazy bitch—the one who'd been with Keltie as she'd smashed Vera's heart to smithereens with a hammer—shrieked. Harder, boy! Come on! SQUEEZE!

No way could Marty have heard, but he *did* see her smile, and no doubt realized that his other hand—the one in between her legs—was soaking wet. So he squeezed harder. And in her mind Keltie heard the crazy bitch squeal with delight, just before her air was completely cut off.

"Good girl," Marty said, sounding like a man who'd just made his pet roll over for a treat. "Look at me now. *Look.* Do you need air? Hmm?"

Keltie did. Her hands slapped frantically at the vice around her throat. Marty waited a moment longer, with his finger still in her ass and the ball of his hand practically crushing her vagina, then let her gasp in.

"GAHHH! HUHHHH! UHHHH!"

"Good girl!"

Leering up at him in between lungfuls of air, Keltie said: "You want a good girl, you need to take me to bed and fuck me. Think you can do that? Come on, Marty."

They hobbled over to the mattress like the world's most awkward team in a three-legged sack race. Keltie's skirt fell to her ankles. In one swift motion she kicked it away and plopped down on the bed, smiling up at Marty through the dregs of mascara running down her face. He paused to clumsily remove his shoes. Patiently as she knew how, Keltie waited. She pulled her panties off and lay back spread-eagle on the bed, open to anything he had in mind. Seconds later Marty removed his jeans and underwear with one, quick tug. His penis, brown and wide, looked delightfully brutal. It stabbed up at the ceiling like a lance.

"Come on, baby," Keltie challenged. "Come on."

She expected him to jump on top of her and start pounding straight away. Instead, he kneeled in between her legs, grabbing hold of the ankles to open her wide. Keltie's pretty holes became fully exposed, while his dick—which was suddenly something she wanted to eat and be killed by at the same time—closed in. Its hot bulb touched the lips of her vagina, hesitated, and then plunged deep.

She tried not to scream. It wouldn't do for him to think she wasn't strong enough, or hungry enough, to absorb his might. But the pain was exquisite—a hulking beast eager to drag her beneath the waters of its desire and pin her down. Swarms of bubbles, their colors immeasurable as they were uncountable, flew before her eyes. Keltie had time to understand that these were *her* bubbles, *her* screams of joy, of anguish. Then she and the beast broke the surface. A breath of air rushed through Keltie's lungs. It came just in the nick of time, for in the next moment, she was down again. Down, down, down in the depths, unable to

escape, unwilling to escape. Thrilled to be loved and torn to pieces by the wondrous creature that kept her hostage.

This time it would not let her go, no matter how many bubbles there were. Still holding her legs wide, Marty's thrusts quickened, pounding Keltie's virgin cunt hard as his hips could manage.

"Yes!" she heaved. *"Yes, Marty! Come on! Harder!"*

"Oh, you LOVE it, don't you?" he snarled back, jamming deep every time the very word—love—was spoken. "LOVE it! LOVE it! **LOVE it!**"

"YES! Talk to me! Talk to me while you FUCK me!"

"Filthy fucking WHORE!"

"YES!"

"YOU **LOVE IT!** Every time I FUCK this CHEAP, SLUTTY little CUNT!"

"TALK TO ME OH FUCK! FUCK, MARTY, FUCK!"

"I'LL FUCK YOU UNTIL YOU SCREAM! SCREAM FOR DADDY RIGHT NOW, YOU SKANKY LITTLE CUM-SUCKING BITCH!"

Keltie screamed. It brought her dangerously close to the edge of passing out, but she screamed. At the same time, she squirted all over Marty's belly, bathing him in who knew what. It didn't slow him down in the least. If anything, his thrusts intensified for a few more, precarious seconds. Then he, too, was spilling his load. Gushing inside of her while his whole body shook. Spent at last, he collapsed on top of her.

"I love you, Marty," Keltie said, barely able to find breath for the words. "I love you so fucking much, baby."

"I love you too, sweetheart," his burning face answered. "I love you, too."

Her hands soothed the scratches she'd dug into his back, rubbing them, massaging them gently. "Baby," she whispered. "Sweetheart. Darling."

"You're beautiful, Keltie. You know that?"

"Yes, I do."

He laughed. "Well, that's half the battle."

"There'd better be more battles to come, mister. Many more."

"Yes ma'am. You have my solemn word."

Seventeen: Monster in the Closet

The room became hot during their violent sex, but soon relaxed to a pleasant warmth that was easy for sleeping. Next morning Keltie awoke. Peering out through a tunnel in the quilt, she could see the snow had stopped. She got up, wincing a little at the soreness between her legs, and found a towel. The bath she'd needed to take last night was still in need of taking. Now more than ever. With body wrapped in cotton, she slipped into the hall in search of a washroom.

An hour went by before her return. By then Marty had come around. She kissed him and told him good morning. He bid her the same before slipping away to make use of the bath himself.

There was a breakfast room downstairs, decorated with bright, pretty tables and gleaming silverware. The complimentary consisted of two pancakes with coffee, eggs, and juice. Keltie tried her hardest to be dainty about the way she ate, but the fact that she was ravenously hungry didn't help matters. It took every bit of willpower not to wolf the entire meal like a truck driver. Marty, for his part, did exactly that, not seeming to care in the least whether his companion took offense (she didn't). At any rate, neither of them spoke until their plates were empty. Draining the last of her coffee, Keltie looked across the table.

"How was it?" Marty asked.

She gave him a wide smirk. "Awesome. Better than awesome."

"All food tastes that way when you're really hungry."

"I wasn't talking about the food."

Yet the fun times couldn't last and they both knew it. It was Tuesday morning. If Bolt didn't already know about Vera's death, he was sure to find out tonight. Then the hunt for her blood would continue. The time had come to plot out what to do next. Trouble was, Keltie had no idea where to begin.

"We could keep looking for Unsichtbar," Marty suggested, "but I don't think it's wise."

"No," Keltie agreed, wadding the idea up in her mind like paper. "That guy's a bust."

"What then?"

Suddenly she thought of the bald man from last night. Hadn't he said something about a library?

"Let's hit the books," she said to Marty.

He looked nonplussed. "I'm sorry?"

"No need to be, my dear boy, no need to be. But I'd love another coffee before we start."

Howling Manor's library was small, cozy...and all but devoid of books about vampires. Keltie found only one among its leather-bound shelves: *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*, by Alan Ryan. Between its covers she found a list of exactly what the title promised. Tales dating back two hundred years, along with the dead authors who'd penned them. She found a seat next to the window and delved in.

The book's introduction did not flood her heart with confidence in destroying Bolt. Many of its passages were written in a tone that almost praised or flattered vampires. One line even suggested that, deep down, humans wanted to be just like them. This was far from the way Keltie felt.

Nor was Alan Ryan's opinion challenged by the stories themselves. The ones she skimmed were all written from the vampire's point of view, and contained little by way of

surviving a violent confrontation with one of the beasts.

What do you need to know about that anyway, girl? You killed two of them in violent confrontation.

Yes, she thought back at that inner voice. *Yes, I did. But that was luck and you know it.*

The worst part came when she stumbled across a scene at the end of Richard Matheson's story, *Drink My Blood*, which featured a young boy reading an essay to his school class:

"When I grow up I want to be a vampire."

The teacher's smiling lips jerked down and out. Her eyes popped wide.

"I want to live forever and get even with everybody and make all the girls vampires."

Keltie closed the book. Outside, Howling was shoveling itself out from last night's storm. Old men in parkas, some of them with blowers, others with nothing more than the muscles God gave them, cleared sidewalks for postal carriers who clapped them on the back and said *Howdy-do?* She wondered morbidly how many heart attacks were going to occur before nightfall.

"Hey."

Her head jerked to find Marty sitting at the other side of the table.

"Sneaky," she said. "I didn't even see you come in."

"I couldn't find Unsichtbar's name in the phone book. The owner here's never heard of him. That goes double for his wife, along with a couple of old geezers I found playing chess in the game room."

Keltie shrugged. "Like I said, he's a bust. But why would Vera give us his name?"

"Maybe he died or moved without her knowing." His eye dropped to the book. "Anything interesting in that?"

"Interesting, yes. Useful, no. Apparently all vampires are heroes."

"Meaning what?"

"I don't know," she told him. "We're on our own. That's all I can think to say."

"You sound frustrated."

"I am."

Sighing, Marty leaned back in his chair. "Well, there's one more lead we can try. Trouble is, we'd need to get back to Norwalk first."

"And what is that?" Keltie asked in a tone that lacked enthusiasm. Reading through the book had not only been a waste of time, but a waste of resources. She felt drowsy, despite the good night's sleep and the coffee. Go back to Norwalk? She wasn't even certain she could make it back upstairs to bed.

"Vera's old bedroom," Marty said, all oblivious. "At my house. There may be something there that could lead us to Bolt."

She shook her head. "I doubt it. Otherwise she would have told us before..." Her lips pursed in awkward silence. "You know. That day."

"Still, I'd like to try. We could drive back tonight if the roads aren't too bad. That way the police might not see us."

Here was a threat Keltie hadn't thought of in awhile. "The police. Jesus. You think we're wanted criminals by now?"

"I wouldn't take it *quite* that far. But it's a good bet they've been told we're gone. And the credit card I used last night can easily be traced."

"Dammit."

"By the way, has your dad called or texted?"

Keltie took her phone out of her bag. "Still no signal," she said.

"Okay. Well let's go back to Norwalk. Check Vera's room. Then face the music."

The simple way he spoke made her almost incredulous. "Music from whom, Marty?" she demanded to know. "Bolt or Huron County Corrections?"

"Pick your poison, girl. One of 'em wants to kill us and the other wants to lock us up."

"Oooh," she grimaced. "Tough choice. You want to let me think about it upstairs in bed for the rest of the day?"

And to her great excitement, he gave a grin that resembled lupine hunger. "Only if I can't distract you with anything else."

The day remained cold, not only on the outside, but inside as well. Howling Manor's owners—the slim bald man and his wife—were brusque with Keltie in the halls, sniffing when she asked for an extra towel, frowning when she purchased a tooth brush and paste from the gift shop. At first she had no clue why; the bald man had seemed quite friendly when they'd checked in. Then Marty reminded her of how much noise they'd made in bed last night, and everything slipped into place.

"Oh my God," she said, "they heard us, didn't they?"

"Probably," Marty replied.

By six o'clock they were back on the road. The signal on Keltie's phone returned as they passed Wooster. Preparing herself for a long lecture on the prices of social recklessness and sexual irresponsibility, she dialed Cameron's number. He answered after the third ring. His tone sounded worried at first (the storm had surprised everyone north of Columbus; reports of fatalities were all over the news), but mellowed once Keltie assured him she was okay.

"How's Mom?" she asked.

"Stable for now. They're sending her home in the morning."

"Good, good."

"Not good, Keltie," Cameron retorted. "It's like that doctor said. She needs a clinic."

"Okay, okay." There were stopped at a red light. Outside her window, Keltie could see two kids building a snowman. "Have you been to her trailer?"

"No. I'm actually about to head out for work."

"I can go if you want. To the trailer I mean."

"Why?"

"To clean it out. Get rid of the liquor."

"Oh!" Cameron said, comprehending. "Yes! Yes. That's a good idea." A moment's hesitation followed, during which Keltie could sense a weighty pronouncement on the rise. She was right. "The police asked about you," he laid out. "Came right to my door."

"I was afraid of that," she moaned. "What did you tell them?"

"Well, I did my best to keep them cool. Told them this wasn't the first time you've run off. Which is true," he added dryly.

"Thanks," she rejoined. "So they're not going to arrest us?"

"I can't speak for your boyfriend, but chances are they're just going to slap you on the behind and send you back to school."

Keltie let out a sigh of relief. She could live with that.

An hour later she called again to let him know they were back in Norwalk. It was 7:30. The town looked frozen and dead. Tired already with the week, though it was only Tuesday night.

Having begun their journey with a detour to Sunset Lane, they ended it with one as well.

As always, their arrival set off every dog in the park. Filthy mongrels snarling and barking from ropes tied to whatever would hold them. Keltie walked to the door of Chloe's trailer thinking that in any moment her head was going to be ripped off.

"Who the hell's out there?" a drunken voice yelled.

"Fuck off!" she yelled back, sticking her key in the lock.

Once inside, she knew turning on the light would be a mistake, but what other choice did she have? Her fingers fumbled on the wall, found a switch, clicked it. Hell leaped into view. Dirty laundry on the floor, dirty dishes on the table. A sound of panicked scuttling from the kitchen that could only mean cockroaches.

"I should have cleaned it before we left," Keltie said, eyeing the wreckage. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Marty said. "I know how it is. I grew up in a house like this."

"Liar."

Now he laughed. "Oh, come on! What gave me away?"

"Vera," she answered immediately. "I could never see her here. Then again I could never see Mom here, either. She was always so clean."

They set to work. The laundry turned out to be no big deal; it was a simple matter of using a hamper they found in the bedroom. The dirty dishes were a bit more difficult. Keltie found herself having to scrub the plates to get them clean, all while keeping an eye out for cockroach ambushes from under the microwave. Marty did the drying in between yelps as one of the bugs would dart over his feet.

They found two liquor bottles under the sink, one in the microwave, and three more in the toilet tank. Five others were hidden at various places in the bedroom. In a mixture of shame and horror, Keltie dumped them all down the drain. She turned to find Marty by the refrigerator, his eyes cast upward.

"What?" she asked, following his gaze.

Poking out from a light fixture on the ceiling was another bottle.

The shame and horror disappeared, to be replaced by pure disgust. "Oh for Christ's sake," she groaned. "How the hell did she get one up there?"

He stood on one of the kitchen chairs to retrieve it while Keltie went to find a vacuum cleaner. There was one in the closet, along with a can of bug spray that made her trigger finger itch. Resisting the temptation for now, she uncoiled the vacuum and took care of the carpets. Only as they were ready to walk out the door did she spray the kitchen, the bedroom, and the bathroom. *Scurry to your god now*, she thought, baring her teeth at a roach behind the stove.

The time on her watch read just after nine when they left. As he drove, Marty explained that he lived across town, on Woodlawn Avenue. He went on to inform Keltie that Vera's bedroom had not been touched since her disappearance, a fact which deflated even further her hopes of finding anything useful.

"If she hasn't been in there since she disappeared, we won't find a single clue about Bolt," Keltie huffed from the passenger seat.

"I didn't say she never went in there," Marty replied. "I said her room hasn't been touched."

Keltie fell silent, though her doubts remained strong. The car eventually stopped in front of a plain-looking house with plain-looking steps that led up to a plain-looking porch. Next door was a large cemetery full of whispering pine trees. Keltie got out. Her breath puffed; her boots crunched the snow.

"What did you tell your family before we left?" she asked suddenly.

Marty's reply was as delicate as it was measured. "I told them I needed to borrow the car."

That a friend of mine had a family emergency.”

“And they bought that?”

“I doubt it. But they don’t care very much about me. Since Vera died they don’t care much about anything.”

She gave him a nod. That was neat. Solemn but neat. The Calinga family had lost a daughter, and in so doing, became fine with losing the rest of their stuff in the bargain. Marvelous. Cool. Peachy keen.

“We’d better get inside before we freeze,” Marty said.

The Calingas apparently went to bed early as well—or what passed for early in these days of midnight double-features and twenty-four hour grocery shopping. Only one light—the kitchen light—glowed in the entire house. All the same, Marty led her upstairs with practiced ease, avoiding an end table here, dodging around a picture shelf there. Keltie did her best to follow his lead, until at last they arrived at the door to Vera’s old bedroom.

She’d been a teenager when Bolt snatched her. Evidence of this fact, even if Marty hadn’t already disclosed as much, lived everywhere on the other side of the door. Butterfly stickers decorated the light switch, which, when flicked, revealed a room of pink walls, white furniture, and red teddy bears.

“Cute,” Keltie said to herself.

“Glad you think so,” Marty said, “because I don’t feel comfortable rooting through her intimate stuff. The dresser drawers, the vanity desk. You can check those.”

Without another word, he knelt to look under the bed. It didn’t take long. Seconds later he was back on his feet, proclaiming the space beneath empty. Next, he checked behind the door. Nothing there either. He looked behind the pillows and every stuffed animal. He inspected the curtains. This last maneuver Keltie watched in utter bafflement. What did he hope to find in the curtains?

Shut up. Just do what he says. He needs this.

She went to the dresser and dug through each drawer one by one. Old-smelling garments, neatly folded, lay in each. A broken blacelet. A few stray coins. In the bottom drawer she found a picture book of Little Red Riding Hood with an unusual cover. It showed a giant black wolf, snarling at a young girl who looked absolutely helpless and terrified. Keltie felt instantly certain that, if this picture existed in the story, the girl was dead meat. No one could escape from the situation depicted here. The wolf looked fast and hungry and insane beyond all hope. Intrigued, she put the book into her bag and searched on.

The vanity desk yielded nothing but some makeup and a jewelry box. There was also an unopened package of Extra, Classic Bubble-Gum flavor—Keltie’s favorite. This she pocketed (after a sniff of its sweet fragrance), before turning to Marty and saying:

“So far, no good.”

His shoulders were slumped. “I know.”

“Let me check the closet. Maybe we’ll strike oil.”

She crossed to the door, opened it—

And really didn’t know what to do next. Her legs froze; her back tingled. Through the corner of her eye she could see that Marty was busy with something on the other side of the room. She called his name.

Then the tall, dark man in the closet smiled and grabbed her throat!

“Oooh,” Bolt’s lips crooned hungrily. “What do we have here? A tiny little mouse in search of a cat.”

Keltie felt her boots lifted off the floor. Her hands leaped up to seize hold the muscles that were choking her almost too hard to breathe, but they were nowhere near strong enough to do any good. She tried clawing at them with her nails, which only made Bolt laugh.

"You've found your cat, mouse," he said. "You've found your—"

A lamp was smashed to pieces on top of his head. Shards of glass flew in every direction as Bolt dropped Keltie and turned on Marty, who now looked very much like he needed a new plan, and fast.

"Good evening," the vampire offered. "That hurt."

"I'm glad."

From her crumpled position on the floor, Keltie thought Marty's retort sounded like a condemned man's final words. Remonstrance hurled at the face of death and fuck whatever came because of it.

With one swipe, Bolt knocked the broken lamp from Marty's grasp. He picked the boy up and threw him across the room into Vera's vanity desk, smashing the mirror. Tubes of lipstick rolled under the bed. Keltie caught sight of one and gasped in—*holy shit, that's Brick, you can't find that shade anymore!* The thought lasted no more than a moment, for in the next, Bolt, with eyes glowing yellow as an owl's, was crossing back to where she lay. A long black cloak billowed from his shoulders. Bolt reached inside of it...

And came out with a stake.

Not caring at all for what that signified, Keltie aimed a kick at the man's groin. Her boots were leather, the toes hard. When the blow connected, Bolt instantly doubled over, dropping his weapon.

"Jesus...*FUCK!*" he moaned. "*God damn, that hurts!*"

"Welcome to my world, freakazoid," Keltie told him as she got to her feet. Her eyes went to the stake. It was familiar. Dried blood (Vera's) decorated it. "So you went to the school," she said to Bolt, who still couldn't uncurl himself from the floor. "Did you see what we did?"

In one hard swipe she kicked the stake under the bed. But her confidence was short-lived, for when Bolt at last found the strength to look at her, his eyes were more than yellow. They were an animal's, with diamond-shaped pupils glowering under eyebrows thick and ragged enough to nest spiders. His teeth, a ravenous shark's, jutted every which way, and when he spoke, it was with the voice of a gorgon.

"*DEAD!*" the beast growled. "*DEAD! BOTH OF YOU! TONIGHT!*"

Keltie retreated a step. The door was directly behind her. If she wanted, she could run through it. Leave Marty and flee down the hall like the mouse Bolt said she was.

Not a chance, the crazy bitch whispered.

Something struck her foot. Keltie looked down to see a wooden cross—the one Marty had brought with him to Howling. From this her gaze went directly to the vanity dresser, where the Filipino still lay sprawled, hurt but indignant.

"Use it," he said gruffly. "Burn him. Burn him straight to hell."

"Yes," Bolt snarled. His shoulders were hunched. At any moment, Keltie knew, the vampire would pounce to bite off her head. "Pick up that symbol of your deity's death. Hold it forth. Incant some *prayer*"—he spat the word in disgust—"to protect you from the darkness. I want to hear, so I can mock your faith before you die."

Keltie's eye returned to Marty, then to the cross, then to Bolt. Everything in the room seemed frozen as the streets. Marty gave her a nod—*go ahead, show him what faith can do*. She nodded back, then kicked the cross away. It slid over the floor and struck the wall.

"Giving up," came Bolt's victorious proclamation. "Smart girl. That's the way."

A low growl began in his throat, growing louder and louder with each passing second. His eyes flashed. This was it. The vampire was going to strike. In three heartbeats at the very most, Keltie would be dead.

But she only let one go by before reaching into her coat to get a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Seeing them, Bolt's muscles loosened. *Ah*, Keltie thought, *now here is a kind of faith I can get behind*.

"What the *hell*?" Bolt said. "Cigarettes?"

Keltie asked if he wanted a light. Before he could answer, she pitched a flurry of loose tobacco into his face. The effect was instantaneous. A scream that shook the porcelain dolls on Vera's shelf exploded from his gullet. Several of them fell and broke. While the vampire's mouth hung open, Keltie took the opportunity to throw a cigarette into his throat. The creature—Bolt—wretched. Keltie saw its Adam's apple bob as it swallowed the profane object whole.

"ACK!" Bolt gagged from his knees.

"Now now," Keltie told him, lighting one of the sticks. "You just need to get used to it. Let that nicotine feed your brain."

The vampire's head, totally black and misshapen as a campfire marshmallow, snapped in her direction. In full monster mode at last, this is what Bolt looked like: claws, teeth, pointed ears. Seething with pure hate. "*Bitch! BITCH!*"

Smiling, Keltie blew a puff of smoke into his face. "So round. So firm. So fully packed."

The monster grabbed Vera's bed and flipped it over on top of Marty, who let out a sharp cry before going utterly still. Keltie saw the stake she had kicked earlier. She saw Bolt bend to snatch it up. What he meant to do did not take a genius to figure out. With the cigarette still between her lips, Keltie dragged in deep as she could. Smoky air filled her lungs just as Bolt whirled around. He held the stake up, letting a grin split his toothy countenance.

"You haven't won yet," he growled.

Holding her breath, Keltie said nothing.

"And you won't," Bolt went on. "No matter how lucky you are, girl, you won't."

Keltie's lip tightened. Sharp needles of pain began to stab her lungs. *Come on, big boy, make your move before I pass out*.

But the vampire did not seem to be in a rush to strike. The stake wavered as he asked: "Are you hearing me? Speak up!"

I can't, you idiot, I need air! The needles, widening into spikes, dug deeper. *AIR!*

In a howl of fury Bolt charged. He didn't get far. Keltie coughed her drag directly into his face, which caused him to stagger backward to the window. She gasped in, coughed, gasped some more. Later on, it occurred to her that this would have been Bolt's prime moment to strike, with his target—much like himself—rendered weak by all the smoke. Instead, he unleashed one final snarl in Keltie's direction, then dove through the glass, sending a raucous cascade of silvery shards onto the lawn below.

"Welcome to my church, Mr. Bolt," Keltie said, once she was able to speak again. "Hallelujah."

A noise from under the bed made her turn. Marty. In a sudden panic for his well-being, she grabbed the frame and lifted. It came grudgingly, giving her small arms all sorts of merry hell, but she did not need to lift high in order for Marty to roll out from underneath. Once he was free, she dropped the frame and knelt to his side.

"Are you all right? Marty? *Marty!*"

He sat up with a weak nod, rubbing his back. "I'm cool."

"Are you sure?"

“Nothing broken, nothing thrown, as the song goes.”

The remark was stupid in the extreme. “Actually, Marty, quite a few things got broken. And thrown.”

“Right. Sorry. I’m delirious.”

“Nah. Just silly. Why don’t you lean back against the bed?”

She helped him get into a more relaxed position. It took several minutes for them both to retrieve their bearings, during which time Keltie noticed him peering from one corner of the room to the next as if in search of something.

“My cross. What happened to it?”

“Oh!” she said. “I kicked it. I think it went under the dresser.”

His next question was inescapable. “But why didn’t you use it?” he asked.

A sigh of air burst from her lips. “Because, dear…”

“Yes?”

She looked at him. “I’m an atheist.”

Silence fell over the room. Tick, tock, tick, tock. Keltie waited, eyeing the smoke that hovered near the light. It looked pretty somehow. Dirty, but pretty. And it had saved her life.

“No shit?” Marty said at last.

“No shit, Marty. The girl doesn’t believe in God.”

“Is it okay if I still do?”

“Of course. One of us needs to have faith if we’re going to get through this.”

“Okay,” he said, kissing her cheek.

Then he stood, reached under the dresser, and fished forth what she had spurned.

Eighteen: Damsel of Darkness

Restitution was in order.

Keltie begged to differ, but that didn't matter. Upon their return to the detention home (a return that felt more like walking up a flight of steps to the gallows of a medieval execution), she and Marty were immediately detained, separated, and placed into isolation for questioning by the police.

At midnight on Wednesday morning, Keltie sat in a bare room with mind devoid. She needed a shower; she needed sleep. Her body ached. She could barely hear the questions from the other side of the table, coming from a portly, bald policeman who, to judge by his affronted tone, seemed to think he was locked in the room with a murderess.

Where had she been? he kept demanding to know. And with whom? And why?

None of it took Keltie by surprise. Indeed, she and Marty had worked out a simple, plain story to tell by way of response. She told it to the cop now, for the tenth time: She'd met a boy from the other wing of the school; they'd run off together for some fun and wound up in Howling.

"And you stayed at the bed and breakfast there?" the cop asked intensely.

"Yes, sir."

"How old is the boy you were with?"

"Sixteen."

"And yourself?"

"Sixteen also."

He kept on until one o'clock, doing his level best to scare the truth from her with his deep, aggressive voice. But the truth was so ridiculous—and the lies so simple—that Keltie had no trouble fending him off. Let him fight Bolt if he wanted the truth. Let him get his head bitten off and crunched to pieces.

At last she was sent upstairs, with the promise that her parents would be contacted in the morning. A night nurse escorted her through the halls. They were dimly lit at this hour. Quiet and cold. Nevertheless Keltie felt sure there were no monsters hiding in the shadows. Or if there were...fuck it. They could devour her ankles to ears for all she cared. One way or another, she was going to lie down and get some rest.

Fuck the world. Fuck the whole fucking world.

"Excuse me?" the nurse said.

Keltie looked up from her shoes. "Oh God, did I say that out loud?"

They had reached the door to her room. After a bid goodnight from the nurse, Keltie went inside to grab a towel. Then it was back down the dark hall for a shower. She kept it brief, yawning more yawns than the soap had bubbles to clean with. Once returned to her room, she all but collapsed onto the bed, where sleep claimed and healed her like a mother she never knew.

March arrived like a lion that year. On the last night of February, a warm front swept north from Oklahoma, hitting Norwalk with heavy, howling winds that knocked down trees and power lines all over town. Most residents accepted the trade-off. HAIL OUR EARLY SPRING! proclaimed one article in the town newspaper, over a photo of a church steeple lying on its side. GIVE OUR REGARDS TO THE OKLAHOMA PANHANDLE! screamed another, this one accompanied by a truck caught nose down in a ditch. A bearded man stood next to the truck

with his middle finger raised towards the camera. The middle finger had been blurred out.

For Keltie and Marty, it meant work. Outdoor work in the whipping gales, collecting twigs like a couple of migrant slaves. The field behind the school needed mowing—or so the faculty insisted. But in reality this was just one in a series of useless punishment chores to be completed before summer break. That, at least, was Keltie's interpretation. Why else had she been told on the day before to scrub toilets in the girls' lavatory? Or on the day before that to polish the gymnasium floor?

Not that any of it bothered her much. Head down, mouth closed, she worked without complaint. At the end of each chore one of the teachers would check to make sure no corners had been cut. Keltie didn't worry about this, either. When they told her to do something over again, she did it. When they told her to do it a third time, she did that too.

Studies went in much the same manner. Never one for raising her hand, Keltie was even less a participant now. The only difference resided in seating. As part of her punishment, she'd been forced by the faculty to place her bottom in the front row of every class. Consequentially, she was called upon more often by the teachers whether her hand went up or not, and sometimes for ridiculous reasons.

"Miss Burke!" the computer teacher yelled one day. "What is your personal opinion of Windows 10?"

A few snickers came from the back row. Paying them no mind, Keltie said: "I think it's deplorable, sir."

"Do you indeed? And why is that?"

"Because, sir..."

More laughing. Cupped, held in check. This time Keltie glanced over her shoulder to see two girls she didn't know lying on pins and needles for the awful truth. Not wishing to disappoint them, Keltie gave it.

"The school's computers used to be pretty slick," she began. "Now they run like they're mentally retarded."

"Quiet!" the teacher snapped at the girls, whose laughter had suddenly overflowed. Then, at Keltie: "Mentally retarded. How lovely. How politically sensitive."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"No you're not. The Keltie Burke I know is never sorry for speaking her mind. However crude her thoughts may be," he added sourly.

"I went into the settings page and disabled automatic updates, sir."

"You did *what*?"

"It seems to have helped a little. All you have to do is set the network connection to metered."

"I see. And on how many of our computers did you do this to, Miss Burke?"

"As many as the school would let me use, sir."

"Miss Burke?" the teacher said, looking more incredulous by the moment.

"Yes, sir?"

"Go to the office. Now."

It took forever to fall asleep at night. Throughout that spring of 2017, Keltie would lie awake after lights out. Rather than count sheep, she dreamed up patterns on the stucco ceiling—a cottage near the door, a copse by the window. Petty things that took her mind off Bolt for awhile.

Where was he and why hadn't he come to kill her yet?

This she couldn't help but wonder whenever she got time alone. Would he suddenly

swoop down from the trees on a cloudy day while she picked up sticks? Or perhaps crash through her window one night and snatch her from the covers like a piece of candy? It was impossible to say, because he seemed to have disappeared.

To make matters worse, the other two men in her life—Marty and Cameron—were keeping mum as well. In the middle of March a single phone call came from her dad, in which he explained that Chloe was refusing treatment for her addiction, and had already restocked the trailer with goodies.

“I wish I could get over there somehow,” Keltie said at the front desk phone (her handset had been confiscated until further notice).

Cameron’s voice through the receiver sounded indignant. “Don’t worry about it. Focus on your studies, Keltie. Your mom has her life and you have yours.”

“Dad,” she said, smiling, “are you still trying to salvage some respectability from me?”

“Help me, Keltie-Wan, you’re my only hope.”

This made her laugh, until she noticed Lucinda Cobb frowning and pointing at her watch.

As for Marty, she missed him in a way that hurt so much she became almost ill with longing. When thoughts of a sudden, calamitous death by vampire weren’t controlling her mind, memories of the tall Filipino’s kisses, his touch, and yes, his cock, were. Now that they were forbidden by the school to see each other, there was little she could do by way of compensation. Sometimes she locked the door at night, took off all of her clothes, and lay naked in bed, imagining his hand on her throat (the love of which made her almost want to believe there really was a god), or his tongue between her legs.

“Fuck me, Marty,” she would whisper up at the stucco, “fuck me as hard as you need to, baby, come on.”

Sometimes it worked. She remembered his comment about not liking women whose genitals looked like a national forest, and took to shaving herself smooth in the shower, on the chance he might knock on her door one night with sweet-smelling flowers and even sweeter-tasting kisses. He never did, but having the softness of her sex laid bare for the first time since the age of twelve made her dreams all the more colorful, all the more potent. And oh, how they ran wild when she let them! Memories of their time at Howling Manor carried the day for awhile, but she soon began to manufacture fantasy trysts, each more adventuresome than the last.

In one she was a cheerleader, and Marty had snuck into the girls’ change room to rape her against one of the lockers. With skirt up, panties down, and her wrists pinned against the metal, he jammed her from behind until she almost screamed—at which point she returned to reality under the covers with said scream barely held in check. In another, she was lying on a hard table. Her head hung over the edge, bringing her face to face with Marty’s enormous cock. “Take a deep breath,” he said. “Deepest you can get.” Keltie did, and then his cock entered her throat, cutting off any more air. She waited for him to come. Waited, waited. Pain flitted over her bare breasts. Tightness. But his cock was still pressed deep, still blocking breath. Keltie looked up, pointed to her chest. *Air, please.* “Do those pretty little lungs need to breathe?” Marty asked. “Do they, sweetheart? Tell me. Tell me!”

Fun fantasies, all. Splendid times under the sheets. She indulged in them almost every night, to the point where topping the previous night’s NC-17 mindshow became a challenge. What more could she do? How crazy could she let herself get?

The answer came from a most unlikely source: Vera’s book of Red Riding Hood. Keltie had taken it partly as a means for study of the dead vampiress’ circumstances on the night Bolt took her life, and partly out of fascination for its lurid cover. As she later found, a banquet

for both waited between the pages.

One night near April Fool's Day, she lay awake in a state of despair, unable to conjure anything satisfactory for masturbation. Then she remembered the cover of Vera's book—the look of ferocious hunger on the wolf's face, the expression of terror on the girl's. Was it still in her bag? she wondered. Her and Marty's things had been rifled upon their return. They'd lost their phones, but as far as she knew, nothing else.

Keltie stood up. The window curtains were open, and a brief thrill at being naked in front of them shot through her. The bag she wanted hung on the closet door. She reached into it. Her hands found what felt like a spine. Eureka! The wolf was still here, still looking hungry as ever.

Delighted, she jumped back into bed. She was even further pleased not to recognize this version of the story's author, a man named Jarett Powell. It could only mean one thing—that no traditional retread of the old story was about to unfold.

Nor did it, though Keltie did not remain fixated by Powell's writing for long. She preferred to let the book's illustrations—done by another unfamiliar name, Ingrid Bremman—reveal its protagonist's fate, a fate which turned out to be grim indeed.

The girl never made it to grandmother's house.

She skipped into the wood with her basket of pretty things and was never seen or heard from again. The whole story was gruesome. Hideous. Appallingly despicable.

Keltie loved every worn, dog-eared page of it. Much to her great appreciation, the wolf turned out to have fetish for breath-play, and exercised it often on the hapless young lass. One of the pictures showed her being held underwater by the neck. In another, she was enduring the bear hug of all bear hugs, with cheeks bluer than Violet Beauregarde's in that old movie about candy bars.

Over the next few days, Keltie read the book five times. Of course the ending never changed (death came to the maiden at last when the wolf finally lost all control of his appetite and tore her to pieces), but that was all right. Never once did Keltie find herself rooting for the girl to win. Much more fun to watch her suffer.

Is this healthy? a voice always asked when these strange moods came down from their cracks on the ceiling.

Sure, Keltie would think back, it's only make believe.

Yes, but every so often, how's about injecting at least a modicum of sanity into your little dream-world? Hmm? Would that be too much?

As a matter of fact...yes. As long as I'm in control of my own craziness I'll be just fine. Now piss off.

Piss off yourself, bitch. I'm just trying to make you see reason.

Except that Keltie was pretty sure her reasoning worked just fine. She knew the real world from fiction, even now that Bolt—that crazy fucker—had jumped the boundary. She could always distinguish play from work, fun from serious. Nor was she the only female who liked to walk the edge sometimes. Vera no doubt had as well, or else why would she have kept a book like this in her old bedroom?

On the inside of the back cover she found one final picture, presumably drawn by Vera. It showed a large, beige-colored house with pillars and gigantic windows. In one of the windows stood a girl wearing a vacant expression, staring out at the world. Above the picture were the words THIS IS ME written in lipstick red. The house looked vaguely familiar, but Keltie didn't give it much thought until later on. Instead, she told herself—with an inner smile of satisfaction towards that whiny, reasonable voice—that the girl was her, too. Trapped by the wolf and

enjoying its savagery until story time came to an end. Which it did every night, after she grew too sleepy to read.

In the middle of April Marty tip-toed behind her in the cafeteria. She was sitting alone with a tray of mashed potatoes and Salisbury steak, dreaming of other things, when a boy in black took the seat next to her.

"Greetings and salutations," the Filipino said.

Keltie gaped. She hadn't seen him in over a month. Now here he was, breaking the rules with a sheepish smile. If any of the teachers saw them together shit would hit the fan all over again.

"Hi," she let out, glancing left and right. Then: "What are you doing here?"

"Keltie, you skinny little bitch!"

She spun in her chair to find Sadie, the tattooed lady, standing next to her.

"Thank you so much for those gym lessons!" she gushed. "Sincerely!"

"Uh...sure," Keltie said. "My pleasure."

"Miss Clevenger couldn't believe her eyes! I didn't fall off the balance beam once!"

"Cool. That's great, Sadie. I'm glad."

"Fuckin' A it's cool! High five, slut!"

Keltie raised her hand to have it clapped hard enough to hurt, and then Sadie was gone towards the lunch counter to get down to business. When Keltie turned back to Marty, his smile was still there, but the sheep had fled.

"You teach gym?" he asked.

"I help some of the klutzy girls get by. They pay me with cigarettes."

"A passing grade in exchange for lung cancer. That seems fair."

"Nicotine keeps my hands from shaking." She looked at him for a moment, then touched his hand. "Okay, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, because I'm really glad you're here. I've missed you like hell. But Marty"—she checked over her shoulder again before continuing, in a lower voice—"if anyone in authority sees us together we're gonna get locked in the basement. Probably until we're eighteen."

"How've you been, sweetheart?" Marty asked. "Just tell me that first."

"Marty."

But his eyes were insistent. On fire with concern. "How've you been?"

She let out a breath. "A little okay and a little crazy at the same time, I guess. I talked to my dad. My mom's all fucked up again."

"Back in the hospital?"

"No, but she will be. It's stupid to leave her alone in that trailer. Of course she's going to drink." Keltie picked up her fork and stabbed angrily at the Salisbury steak. "They want me to gain weight," she said, stuffing a bite into her mouth. "The war on prettiness. It's very political, you know. Fat lives matter. Have you seen what Norwalk High's cheering team looks like?"

"No."

"Pigs. Oink! Oink!"

"I'm sorry about your mom."

A few seconds went by before she was able to answer. She swallowed the bite, along with a few tears, and said: "Yeah. Me too."

"Attention students!" the loudspeaker brayed. *"This is an important announcement!"*

"Oh boy," Marty groaned. "Principal Margot's on the warpath again."

"The fecal matter recently discovered under the back porch has officially been determined

as human in nature! The person or persons responsible for this despicable act are hereby warned to refrain from further jocularity, or face severe punishment! That is all!"

Laughter rose from several of the other tables.

"Innocent," Keltie said, when Marty gave her a grin. "But can you believe that crazy woman would talk about poop during lunch hour." She frowned at her steak, no longer hungry. "So much for getting fat."

"Any word from Bolt?"

"I was trying to think of how to ask you that same question. No. I haven't heard a peep."

"Me either." One of the teachers suddenly walked past, forcing Marty to hunker down.

"What do you think it means?" he asked from the corner of his mouth.

"Either he's plotting something or he went to Alaska to enjoy the civil twilight. My guess is the former."

"Yeah, but why would a powerful monster like him need to plot?"

"Because," Keltie said, touching him on the back, "we haven't been easy prey."

"So it's a matter of him getting down to business?"

She nodded. "Serious business. Next time he comes, I don't think we can rely on luck."

Another teacher passed. Marty stiffened for a moment, then began to talk in a strange, high voice. "I loved those shoes you wore yesterday! Oh my gawwwd! So cute!"

"Marty?" Keltie said, flummoxed. "What the fuck?"

"Ssst! Teacher! Pretend I'm a girl."

"She's gone, dear. It's safe to acknowledge your balls again."

He looked down at his pants, then blushed when he saw Keltie doing the same. "Speaking of my balls," he said.

She grinned. "Have the nights been rough without your damsel of darkness?"

"A rhetorical question if ever there was one."

"Can you make it over to my room tonight? I'll give you all the rhetoric you need." She felt a hand touch her knee under the table. "Is that a yes?"

"Midnight," he whispered.

"Ooh! Sneaky. Anything special you'd like me to wear?"

"Black, if possible. Since both of us are up to no good."

"We always are, Marty," Keltie said, guiding his hand towards the hem of her skirt. "We always are."

Nineteen: Depth and Discovery

In regard to Marty's request, she decided to give the full treatment. She returned to her room after a long shower to find a black vest that left the navel exposed, a pair of fishnet leggings, and the most dangerous mini-skirt—also in black—ever conceived by needle and thread. With this outfit laid out, Keltie turned to her make-up kit. She spent an hour applying black to her eyes, foundation and rouge to her face, red to her lips.

"Boy," she said to the mirror as the hour crept past 11:30, "if you don't show up tonight I'll fucking kill you."

But he did show up. At precisely 12AM there was a light tap on the door. Fully donned and ready for action, Keltie opened it to a tall, dark, handsome stranger with a rose in one hand and—Lord love him—a length of silk in the other.

"Get in here, you," she purred.

"Keltie?" Marty said in disbelief at what he was seeing. "Wow."

"Like it?" She closed the door behind him, locked it.

His eyes began to feast, starting with her boots and working their way up. It made Keltie hot. Hotter. She flashed a smile, arched a brow, blew a kiss. Then she turned to give him a look at the goods from behind.

"It's so perfect I don't have words," he said at last. "You look astonishing, Keltie. Damsel of darkness indeed."

"You won't need words," she told him, peering over one slender shoulder. "Is that another rose from poor Mrs. Cobb?"

Marty looked at the flower as if he'd forgotten it was even there. "No, no. Not this time," he insisted.

She closed the distance between them like a cat, never once dropping her eyes. Slowly her hand reached out, touched the flower, caressed it. "Are you sure?" she whispered to the face above her.

"Feel the thorns, Keltie. This flower is for no one but you."

A scent of chocolate cologne impelled a long breath into her lungs. Holding it, her other hand found the silk. "And what about this?" she let out.

"I can tell you," he said, "or I can show you."

He kissed her then, long and deep. Keltie took it like a glutton. Rising to the toes of her boots, she let her red nails run wild through his hair, while he in turn ran his arms up and down her back. She remembered how powerful those arms were. How they had carried her through a blizzard. Her breath ran out, and when she gasped, more of the chocolate cologne got in. It was the last straw. Her knees buckled. Like paper, Marty caught her up. Keltie felt the bulge of his crotch against her belly. She felt his fingers unzip the back of her vest. Raising her arms, she let him take it off completely, then allowed him to unhook the brassiere underneath, which brought her soft, slender chest into full view. With much needed air her breasts rose. It only helped a little. A tidal wave was coming in, and it looked too high to handle alone.

Come on, girly-o, do something before you faint.

She lifted her boots off the floor, so Marty could carry her. And carry her he did, over to the bed, where she lay back to let him tie her wrists to the headboard.

"Ooh, honey," she cooed. "You have a very keen sense of direction."

He shushed her with kisses over the breasts and belly. There came a jingle as the belt of

her skirt was unbuckled. He pulled down the zipper.

"Have you been a good girl?" he asked, slipping the skirt away from her panties.

"Yes, Daddy," she answered.

"Don't lie to me."

Now she felt her panties come down, felt his eyes on her hairless cunt, her tight crotch.

"No, Daddy, I'm not."

He reacted by taking skirt and panties completely off, and then lifting her legs from below the knees, higher and wider, higher and wider. "Open," he commanded, menacingly. "Open. Come on."

Keltie helped him bring her legs back. Back, back, back, until Marty could see absolutely everything there was to see down there.

"Good girl. Good girl. How does that feel?"

All she could manage by way of reply was a smile. It seemed to be enough. She felt his finger play over her soaking wet slit before moving down to poke curiously at the much tinier, much tighter hole to the south. Here, for the first time, Keltie began to get nervous. Her eyes fluttered as Marty gave a gentle push. The hole stayed shut, but it wouldn't sustain much more.

"Uh!" Keltie let out. "Mmn!"

"Hurt?" she heard him ask.

"Just be careful."

His response was cause for more fluttering. The finger retreated, and Marty stood to undress himself. She gawked at his wide, tanned chest, then gawked some more when, for the first time in months, she saw his penis spring from beneath his jeans. Armed and ready for business, Marty approached the bed again. He lifted her legs back to re-establish the earlier view.

"Um," Keltie said, eyeing his dick, which looked far too eager to fit the place he seemingly had in mind, "I'm *curious*, sweetheart, don't get me wrong, but—"

"Shh."

"I don't know if I can do it." *And I don't want to poop all over the bed*, she almost confessed. But rather than disquiet his mood with thoughts of this happening, she beared down on her sphincter muscles instead to assess the situation. All felt clean and empty. But then what did that guarantee? Not a damned thing.

Her groin was now aimed at the ceiling, much the way a gynecologist would want during a yearly exam. Cold light reflected off the buckles of her boots. Marty touched her pelvis. His brown dick loomed, monstrously hard. Prepared to explode.

"It's okay," he suddenly said. "We don't have to. I was curious, too."

She gave him a look. The face looking back—nervous and hesitant—was not the kind she liked to see in a bedroom. Oh no. That would never do. Confident and domineering were much more interesting traits to find in a sex partner. Keltie flashed him a devil grin—one that came directly from Miss Crazy Bitch. "There's Vaseline on the table."

He paused to put some of it on. Keltie watched, and saw that his hands were shaking a little. Yes, he was nervous all right. But also very excited. So at least they were both on the same page.

"Take a nice, slow, deep breath," Marty said.

His hands were on her hips again. Keltie inhaled, bringing her breasts up high.

"Good girl. Let it out."

"*Phew!*"

"Good girl."

Marty bent his knees, bringing the tip of the monster's head into direct contact with her closed hole. Gently then, he began to push.

Mmmn. Oh God...

The hole kept shut. Suddenly it felt very small, while at the same time the monster had become wide as a newel post. Keltie grimaced. There was pain now, though Marty remained in check. And still the hole would not open. Marty came closer, shifting his weight. She fought an urge to bear down, to push back. Snatching a breath into her lungs, she bent her hips a little more.

And finally the monster broke through.

Keltie's eyes flew open. The sudden fullness from down there, the tightness, alarmed her on the spot. Marty's dick felt like the biggest, most painful bowel movement waiting to happen. She couldn't accommodate him. She wasn't *meant* to accommodate him, not through that passage. But so far she hadn't signaled for him to stop, and the monster was still curious, getting in there, checking things out at increasingly deeper levels.

She might have called the whole thing off right then and there, but that was when Marty reached into her vagina with two of his fingers, curling them backward against the palm of his other hand, which had found its way to her pelvic bone.

"HAAAH!" she gasped, hips jerking.

The monster retreated a little, then redoubled its efforts, going further than it had ever been while Marty continued to work the ceiling of her vagina, forking her breath away with palm and fingers. Keltie's eyes gawped towards the stucco, though the patterns there no longer interested her. Indeed, she could no longer even see them. Spots of color shone everywhere—flashbulbs from a million different psychedelic cameras going off in endless spectacle. What the hell was he doing down there?

"Go!" she moaned, for want of anything more coherent to say. *"Go!"*

And the monster went deeper. She felt it hit the danger point—the point where her body warned of imminent accident—and didn't say a word. Speech meant nothing anymore. It had become the only impossible thing in a sudden universe of all that was wondrous.

"OH!" she let forth, with every thrust of his palm, every curl from within. *"OH! OH!"*

And her hands squeezed into fists. And the colors flashed, and her lungs begged for breath. Begged and begged. And she cried out again at the kaleidoscope—*OH! OH!*—and the colors cried back with the screeching of birds in a stormy sky. Keltie's back arched until the bones of her ribs threatened to tear through her skin. She begged Marty to stop; she begged him to keep going. *Keep going! Keep going! I need this! Oh yes! OH YES!*

"It's okay," she heard him speak from somewhere behind the lights. "Go ahead, sweetheart. It's fine. It's beautiful."

And with one, final cry into the void, Keltie succumbed. Twisting and twitching, her body let loose everything it could no longer retain. And the screeching became singing, and the storm, a garden. And then, in a flurry of heated breaths, it all came to a slow and delicate stop.

The courage to look down was a long time in coming. While she waited, Marty untied her, wearing the oddest smile she'd ever seen on a boy. "Did I?" she asked.

Marty nodded. "You did."

"Oh my god! I'm so sorry."

"Don't you dare be sorry," he told her. "Don't you dare."

"But—"

"I'm very happy to have made you feel *that* good, Keltie. Very happy."

"It felt better than good, Marty. I'm not sure I would ever want to do it that way again, but..." She smiled up from the pillows. "Whoa. God. So intense."

"For me too." He let out a laugh. "I can't believe I didn't fall over."

"Oh, I can make you fall over," she winked. "Next time we do this I'll prove it."

He helped with cleaning the mess. As they worked, Keltie became more and more curious as to why they'd done what they did, in that way, with not only a total disregard for hygiene, but for the boundaries of their relationship as well. *What boundaries?* the crazy bitch wanted to know. But this time the more rational side of herself came back with a raised hand. Spreading a new sheet on the mattress, she asked Marty what had brought it all on. What had made him hungry enough—lusty enough—to do what he'd done?

His answer was stunning in its simplicity. "You," he said. "Just you."

"Come on. I'm not that awesome."

"Nah. You only fought off three vampires. Killed two of them. You suck."

"Actually," she said with a small grin, "I fought four and killed three. One of them with the help of some heavy traffic."

"See? That's called awesome, dear."

"It's also called lucky."

He sat to put on his shoes. With sinking heart (he would be leaving soon), Keltie watched him. Despite the opinion he'd offered on her greatness, she didn't want to sleep alone tonight. Her dreams had been far from sweet of late, and she no longer trusted the stucco patterns to sing her off with pleasant pictures. Were she kill the lights now, it would more than likely be Bolt's face that appeared on the ceiling, eyes black, snarl fierce. Or perhaps Vera's, weeping tears of despair. No thank you.

"Hey," she said, "can you stay here until I fall asleep?"

His hand stopped with one shoelace hanging over the thumb. "Of course. Are you all right?"

"I will be if you stay."

Kicking the shoes off, he stood and crossed the room to her. She fell into his arms with a sigh of relief.

"Late night jitters," he said, doubtless noticing the enthusiasm in her hug.

"Always, baby."

His arms squeezed tighter. "Well let me try and help you with those. Hey!" he suddenly called out.

She looked up to see that he'd noticed something on her bookshelf. Following his gaze, she guessed that more than likely it was Vera's strange little book of Dead Riding Hood. The guess proved accurate not two seconds later when Marty broke their embrace to pluck it from the mess of other well-thumbed titles.

"Wow," he marveled, seating himself on the mattress. "Dead Riding Hood. I forgot about this."

"I...took it from Vera's room," Keltie confessed. "I was hoping maybe there'd be some clue in it about Bolt. But no."

Marty looked up from the cover. "No?"

She shook her head. "It's a strange book though. You've seen it?"

"I used to see her reading it sometimes. But I've never actually opened it."

That was enough for Keltie. She stepped forward in an attempt to take the book from him. "Yes, well, it's useless, like I said. Very boring."

He opened the book.

From here Keltie had two choices: snatch it from his hands or let him explore the literary genius of its creators. With an inner cringe, she chose the latter. Not that there were any surprises in it about the girl whose rectum he'd just ejaculated into, but what would it make him think of its previous owner? She watched as Marty looked at one page, and then the next, and then the next. But for the ruffling of paper, the room had gone dead silent. Much to her shock, Marty broke it by beginning to read aloud.

"Dear me!" Dead Riding Hood exclaimed. "I seem to have gotten myself lost in these woods! Whatever shall I do now?"

"Don't worry, little girl," a smooth, rich voice suddenly purred from behind a tree. "I'll make sure you find your way home...nice and safe."

And with that, the wolf appeared before Dead Riding Hood's astonished face. She gasped. He was a huge beast, with brown fur and yellow eyes. And fangs. Terrible, murderous fangs.

"Oh," the wolf whispered at the sound of her breath. "Such pretty, pretty lungs. Pretty lungs in a pretty girl."

Marty looked up from the page and smiled. "Heavy."

"Yeah," Keltie managed.

"Have you read all of it?"

"Well...yes. Again, I was looking for clues about Bolt."

"You missed two. The girl is Vera. The wolf is Bolt."

"I don't know about that. Maybe."

She decided to take a seat on the bed so they could study the piece together.

"In fact I wouldn't be surprised if Bolt gave this to her," Marty added. "As a message. Owner and pet. Chances are he knew Vera liked to read."

"Maybe," Keltie said again. "But it's a stretch, Marty."

"I've never seen this title in any bookstore."

She touched the corner of the page. "No. I think for titles like this you need to ask the manager for a special key. A special key for a special door."

"Either that or you need to be a monster who's been to some dark places."

Suddenly Keltie remembered the picture she'd seen on the back cover—the one drawn not by the illustrator, but somebody else. "Check the back," she told Marty. "The very back. There's an extra picture."

He did as she asked, and there, as before, was the much more crudely drawn girl in the much more crudely drawn house, frowning from the upper window.

"This is me'," Marty read. Then: "Holy shit."

"I guess it's not such a stretch after all," Keltie had to admit. "I mean the girl was presumably drawn by Vera. She's—"

"No, I mean holy shit, Keltie." Marty's face was transfixed, his eyes wide. "This house. I know this house."

She looked at the picture again. The house, she remembered, had indeed looked familiar when she'd first laid eyes on it weeks ago. Now she studied it more closely, hunting for a connection. Huge windows. Stone pillars. Something that looked like a fountain or maybe a flower bed on the front lawn.

"I don't know," she let out, flustered. "I mean it *does* look like one I've seen, but—"

"It's the Wooster-Boalt home."

"The *what*?"

He looked at her. "Wooster-Boalt. I don't think many people call it that anymore, but those

were the names of its previous owners.”

Keltie was confused. Frowning at the picture, she asked why the house would be named after the man who supposedly lived there now. Had Bolt built the place himself? Drawn up plans and shouted orders through his fangs to construction workers in the middle of the night?

“No, no, no,” Marty cut in. “Not *Bolt*. *Boalt*—B-O-A-L-T. This was a totally different person. I think,” he added, more gently.

“So it’s just a coincidence?”

“Probably. Though the vampire Bolt might be old enough to have seen it built. Around 1830. The house was used as a seminary for girls for about ten years. Then someone turned it into a private residence.”

“I still don’t quite recognize it—“

“It’s on West Main Street. Number 114.”

Keltie shrugged. “All right.”

“I’d like to check it out,” Marty said, never once lifting his eyes from the girl in the window. “In the daytime, of course. Find out who or what is living there.”

She kept her silence, but felt her stomach tighten at the idea of wandering around another ancient house where death quite possibly dwelled. It wasn’t like Bolt would invite them both in for tea if it turned out he really did live there, nor would he be as stupid as the Satanists from Howling. If they fucked things up the way they had in Howling, there’d be no idiot in a hockey mask and a green jumpsuit to return the favor. They would only become another piece of this number 114’s long history. Two more dead people who’d once walked its halls.

“You’re not planning to knock on the front door, I hope,” she said.

“Actually,” Marty replied, looking thoughtful, “that might not be such a bad idea.”

“*What?* Why not?”

Smiling, he closed the book and tossed it on the bed. “Good day, Miss Burke. I’m Marty, from Columbia Gas. We’ve had reports of an odor in your neighborhood that may very well be related to our services.”

“Huh?”

“As a precaution, I have been advised by my company to inspect your furnace, as well as the lines attached to it.”

She gaped in total bewilderment for several more seconds. *This must be how Sadie feels all the time*. Then it hit her. What Marty planned to do was pose as a man from the gas company who needed to check the lines.

It was simple. It required barely any effort to execute. Its chances for success were actually quite high.

It was the stupidest idea she had ever heard. “There’s no way you can pass for a utility man,” Keltie said. “You’re sixteen years old.”

“I’ll be seventeen next month.”

“And if Bolt sees you he’ll recognize you. And even if he doesn’t see you he’ll recognize me.”

Marty threw up his hands. “What then? Because that’s the best I’ve got on short notice.”

“I know,” Keltie said, taking one of the hands in her own and slowly bringing it down.

“That’s part of our problem. We haven’t given our next move enough thought.”

“It’s not—“

She put two fingers over his lips. “Shh. Let’s sleep. Give some better ideas time to develop.”

“Bolt might not wait.”

“He has so far.”

They lay down on the bed and closed their eyes. Cradling Marty’s head on her breast, Keltie drifted off almost instantly. Hours later, she awoke to the sound of him leaving—the pull of a zipper, the ring of a belt buckle. She smiled, blew him a kiss, and told him to be careful on the stairs. With a promise to be stealthy, Marty opened the door and was gone.

No solutions came in her dreams. No great revelations, no new ideas. In the books Keltie sometimes read, things like that happened to their protagonists all the time. Lazy authors seemed to think that whenever you got stuck on a problem you could just go to sleep and let your subconscious handle all the work. In real life, of course, the rules were just a tiny bit different. Problems that people couldn’t solve came around every week. Most simply blew over like summer storms, hectic yet harmless. Most, but not all. Some of them tore families apart; some of them took lives. For others still, it was the sufferer’s sanity they claimed.

The current darkness in Keltie’s sky threatened all three; however, it wasn’t for her dreams to decide what should be done about it. She awoke the next morning still buoyant from the previous night’s adventure, and went downstairs to breakfast with a spring in her step and a smile on her face.

“What’s up with you?” Amanda said, buttering her pancake.

“I’m stuck in a mess,” Keltie answered dreamily. “A great big mess. And I don’t know how to get out.”

The other arched a brow. “Looks more to me like you’re in love.”

“I don’t even know what love is.”

“Could have fooled me. Have some pancakes.”

Keltie picked up her coffee instead. “Here’s to not knowing things, Amanda.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to toast. But since we have a math test today, I’m all in.”

Their cups touched.

“To not knowing!” they cheered.

Twenty: The Wind and the Rain and the Sky and Everything

Ohio was more safe during the spring of 2017 than Keltie ever could have dreamed. It stood to reason, since Bolt was nowhere around. Shortly after their confrontation at Marty's house, he had returned to Great Britain for a holiday with Anissa. He liked to do so every four or five years. That was typically all the time his heart would allow itself to be separated from home. On this occasion, he'd left earlier in the year, confident the weather in Frodsham would be every bit as cold and miserable as it was in Ohio, to get away from the girl who'd been giving him so much trouble of late. He'd gone early to get away from Keltie.

Irish girls were such a bother. Feisty and outspoken, while at the same time suspicious of anyone who claimed to enjoy their company, it was a wonder any of them had friends at all. If only she were Pinoy, like the boy she'd befriended of late, taciturn and apologetic.

Or Chesire, like the girl he walked with now. She was a dainty little thing, blonde, with a soft voice cool as the wind blowing through the trees tonight in Castle Park. They strolled beneath a clear sky rife with stars, talking about crocuses, which hadn't come up yet, and about the moon, which had. Her name was Lexi. She was a wedding photographer who'd been selling wares at a picture festival earlier that day. Bolt liked her very much. Courteous, kind, and tactful, she thanked him for dinner (after he'd plucked her from the throng like a pet shop patron in love with a new kitten) before going on to compliment the shine on his boots, the sweep of his cape. All of this before Bolt even suggested a walk in the park, to which she immediately said yes.

"I just love these cold, crisp nights," Lexi gushed at present, her eyes lost in the trees. "Sometimes I even go walking alone, though my father'd have my head if he knew."

"And how old are you, Lexi?" Bolt asked with polished charm.

"I'm twenty-three. I'm hoping my picture business takes off soon, so I can move to London."

Bolt smiled. "I love London. I'm like you, Lexi. I need dreary skies."

"There's such poetry in it, you know? *Such* poetry. The wind and rain have a voice, and if you listen, you'll hear them sing."

They walked a little way further, and soon arrived at the park's arts and crafts building. It was closed at this hour, of course, to which Bolt made special mention of what a pity they couldn't go inside. He then asked if Lexi had anything on display there.

"Oh no," she breathed out, as if the very idea were quite silly. "Right now I only work at weddings."

"You must have great appreciation for the bonding between a man and a woman."

At this the girl's eyes came alight so fast Bolt was almost blinded. "Oh, I do! So very much! *Above all,*" she suddenly intoned, "*love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of—*"

"OUCH!"

Her voice came to a faltering stop. "What is it?"

"Twisted my ankle," Bolt said. "I'm sorry."

"Oh. Now where was I?"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure I got your message—"

"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."

With that, Bolt suddenly burst into flames. Its effect on Lexi was twofold: First she screamed, ripping the tranquility of the night into a million shreds, and then she ran pell-mell

back towards the gate. Lost in frantic effort to beat the flames on his cloak, Bolt had no time to shout explanations. Indeed, he had nearly begun to scream himself, as the clasp on his cape was jammed and wouldn't come loose.

"*Goddammit!*" he yelled.

Lexi's feet carried her like the wind. She breasted a hill and went down the other side, out of Bolt's eyesight. But not for long. Just as the cape finally let go, he heard another scream, and looked up to see a white-gowned Anissa floating through the trees. One of her clawed hands had a firm grip on Lexi's throat, cutting off any more noise it might make. The other was raised towards Bolt with the index finger wagging back and forth.

Scowling, Bolt stomped out the last of the flames. His cape was ruined. Probably his pants too. All because the silly bitch he'd chosen for tonight had a good head for Bible quotes.

"Let me tell you something," he said, "I have had a *really* rough go of things lately."

Anissa's feet gently touched the ground. She still had a lock on the girl's throat, who probably hadn't drawn breath for two minutes or more. In other words, she was dead. Blue, limp, ready for devouring. Whatever.

"You'll be all right," the vampiress breathed. "Everyone goes through it from time to time."

Bolt kicked his now useless cape into the bushes. "I don't know. I thought I was just having bad luck with Keltie. But now this one"—he gestured at Lexi's corpse—"punches me in the nose, too."

"You toy with your prey too much. Go and eat when you're hungry, dear."

As if to demonstrate what she meant, Anissa took a bite from the girl's shoulder.

"You think that's all?" Bolt asked hopefully.

"I know that's all. Stop planning so much and *do*."

"On a normal night that's how I work. I don't have trouble in cities like Cleveland. But this one girl. This Keltie Burke."

"She's only human. You'll have her. One thing you might try—if you really do like toying—is punching her in the gut. Here." She tossed Lexi onto the ground near Bolt's feet. "Dig in. She's yours."

But Bolt was no longer interested in food. He looked at his mistress in a quizzical way and asked: "What do you mean, punch her in the gut?"

"Hit her where it hurts, darling. Hit her and do it hard. Does she have friends? Family?"

"Both, I think," Bolt replied, thinking of the Filipino boy, and of a man that Lloyd had seen visiting her at the reform school.

Anissa smiled. "Well then. Try going after them. Find the eyes of this Keltie girl's love, and gouge them out. In my time I've found that real human suffering comes from the death of love."

Bolt gave her a slow, thoughtful nod. It wasn't a bad idea at all. Keltie had certainly made him suffer. Why not return the favor before killing her in the slowest, most painful way he could dream up?

"Or," Anissa went on, "I could fly over and take care of her for you." She snapped her fingers. "Quickly. No pain, no strain."

"No," Bolt told her. "No. That's just it, mistress. For Keltie, I want pain and strain. I want that in abundance."

"So what are you waiting for?"

He smiled before looking back at Lexi's dead body. "Let's eat here first. Celebrate a kill like the scoundrels we are."

Twenty-one: Holocaust Girl

Keltie's happy mood lingered until the beginning of May. It made no sense, for Bolt was (presumably) still on the prowl. Or was he? As April came to a close, she began to wonder. Night after night she lay awake with a tray of cigarette ashes, until her body could no longer stand the punishment of lucidity, only to awaken next morning with all the room quiet and undisturbed. Not long after her tryst with Marty she began visiting the school library at the end of each day, scouring its newspaper rack for articles about strange or unexplained deaths. And while there were indeed a few (a man had gotten on a bus in the middle of the night, only to disappear before that bus reached its next stop; another man, perfectly sane with a wife and two daughters, had jumped without provocation from the fourth level of a shopping mall as his wife stood nearby paying their cell phone bill), Keltie could associate none of them with bloodthirsty attacks from dark shadows.

By the first of May she all but put vampires out of her mind. There were two reasons. The first had to do with final exams, which were no longer just a blip on the school radar, but a looming beast whose shadow chilled the heart of every girl in the north wing. More and more Keltie visited the library to study rather than read newspapers. Her grades in both science and math were low. To fail their finals meant a possible second trip through her sophomore year. There were also a few midnight crunch sessions in her dorm room with Amanda, albeit these more often than not collapsed beneath the weight of distraction.

The second reason was Chloe.

Keltie was in the gymnasium one afternoon, practicing cross handstands, when a summons came from Principal Margot. She was to report to the front desk immediately. Breathing hard from exertion, Keltie asked why.

"It's your mother, I'm afraid, dear."

She followed Principal Margot at once, so that it was in bare feet and a leotard that she met Cameron at the front desk, who told her that Chloe was back in the hospital.

"Same reason as before?" Keltie asked, glancing at the principal and Mrs. Cobb.

His answer of course was yes, and twenty minutes later they were on their way to Fisher-Titus Memorial. "She wants to see you," Cameron kept saying as he drove. "I told her you have exams. That you need to buckle down on your schoolwork. But she's insisting."

"It's okay, Dad. I want to help her."

"You can't help her, dear. She has to help herself. Goddammit!" Keltie jumped as he yelled. His truck lurched to a stop. "Fucking traffic lights are *always* changing to yellow *just* as I'm about to drive through!"

A chill touched her. This was the way Cameron used to talk in the ugly days, just before hauling off with a mighty slap or a squeeze on the throat.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to pay for all these hospital stints," he went on. "Jesus! It's not like my health insurance at the church will fucking take care of the whole load!"

"But you are insured?" Keltie asked tentatively.

"Yes."

Well, that was something. Not enough, but something. She tried not to think about the rest as Cameron parked the truck and they walked inside. Chloe's room was at the end of a long hall in the old section where patients had been coming, going, and dying for fifty years. Pale yellow walls, fake plants, well-polished floors. A lingering scent of alcohol. Name plaques on closed office doors. Keltie herself had been born in this wing, only ninemonths before the

World Trade Center attacks. According to the stories Chloe used to tell, her dad used both days—birthday and death day—as an excuse to get drunk.

Maybe it's no wonder I turned out the way I did, Keltie thought presently. *I'm a holocaust girl.*

When they reached Chloe's door Cameron refused to go inside. "Your turn," he said, frowning. "I've seen enough already."

The room was dimly lit, though the afternoon skies were clear. On the bed lay the woman Keltie had come to see. She looked like a dead witch. Her gray hair fanned the pillows—an open peacock's tail bleached of all color. Her skin hung around knobby bones and dark, sunken eyes. Hovering back, Keltie wondered how she should proceed. The old woman looked to be asleep. Would it be rude to wake her, to force an early return to this sad world that gave her so much pain?

Chloe's head suddenly moved. Two eyes, caught in the light, shined across the room.

"Hi, Mom," Keltie braved.

The voice that called back sounded weak as a neglected flower. "Keltie. Come here, baby. I need you here."

She crossed the room and took hold one of Chloe's cold hands.

"Oh my goodness," the old woman smiled. "Look at you. Still dressing like Cyndi Lauper."

Blushing, Keltie glanced down at her skirt, her boots. "Cindy who?" she asked.

Chloe waved the question off. "It's all right. You're a teenager. You're allowed to have fun." Her smile dropped a little. "Are you having fun, Keltie? Because you'll never be stronger than you are now. You'll never be more hungry or brave."

"I don't think I'm very responsible with fun, Mom. I live in a juvenile center."

"Making any friends there?"

She thought of Penelope. Of Amanda. And of course, Marty. "A few," she answered.

"And how are your grades?"

Here Keltie was forced to suppress a grimace. "Not perfect. But I'm passing all my classes. What about you, Mom? How are you feeling?"

"I'm in a hospital, Keltie," the other said with an arid sneer. "I feel pretty bad."

"So let's get you well again."

"Who? You and your dad?"

"That's just right. Me and Dad. And you, Mom," Keltie added. "There has to be you."

Chloe's sneer deepened. "Now we get down to it. Mom needs to quit drinking."

"Yes. I'm afraid you do."

Keltie felt the older woman's hand slide from her grip. "I told you," she said. "I don't know how." Her eyes went to the ceiling, as if to measure the gloominess of her situation. "I get so damned *lonely*. And please don't offer to have your father come visit. We tried to be friends once already."

"No," Keltie said, though she'd been about to suggest that very thing. "Of course not."

Chloe looked back at her. "My only friend these days is the bottle, dear. It's all I have."

At this a flame of rage burst in Keltie's heart. And for the first time, she had an understanding of how Cameron felt towards his ex wife. No wonder his temper tended to erode whenever they discussed her. She was drowning, and apparently didn't wish to be saved.

"Knock it off," Keltie snapped. "You sound like an old Garth Brooks song."

"Why don't you come back to the trailer some time? Spend the night like you did last year. Remember that?"

“Not much of it. Listen, Mom—“

“Fewer memories equals less guilt.”

“I’m not going to let you rot away in that goddamned trailer.”

Chloe gaped from the pillows, allowing several seconds to pass before she spoke again.

“Did your father teach you talk that way?” she managed.

“When him and I leave here today,” Keltie said, “we’re going back to Sunset Lane and give that pile of rust another cleaning. And *you*,” she pushed on overtop of whatever it was Chloe opened her mouth to retort, “are going to enroll in rehab. You’re going to enroll even if it means I have to break out of that stupid school again and throw you through the front door.”

“You don’t talk to your mother that way!”

“I do whatever’s necessary, Mom.” She’d been sitting on the edge of the bed; now she stood up.

The effect on Chloe was instant. “Where are you going?” she demanded, terrified. “Stay here!” A desperate hand clawed from under the sheets, snatching at Keltie’s skirt. “Please!”

Keltie hesitated. It was like before—like last year, when she’d needed to get back to school but Chloe had begged her to stay. She’d relented then. But today—

“All right,” she said, relenting again. “I can stay. But Mom? I meant what I said.”

Sighing deeply, Chloe lay back into the pillows. Her eyes found the ceiling and would not leave as she told Keltie: “If you fix me, I’ll just break again. I always do. I sit alone in that trailer and I start crying. Then I start drinking.”

“When I graduate school I’ll come and live with you,” Keltie said. All of her anger had flown. Being with Chloe was like that, she’d found. One minute you hated her, the next you loved her. She was sweet; she was stupid. She was a helpless old drunk who happened to be her mother. “Two years, Mom. And I’ll come visit you in the meantime. How does that sound?”

She wouldn’t answer. But maybe that was okay. Keltie watched her stare at the TV (which was turned off) and could tell that her thoughts about the idea weren’t all bad.

Oh yeah? And since when did you know how to read minds?

“Good,” Keltie said, shoving her pessimism aside. “What’s on TV?”

She reached for the remote, sat back on the bed, and pressed the ON button.

Well, well, well, Bolt said with a suave smile. What have we here? He took a lady’s hand, kissed it. Greetings. I’m Lando Calrissian. I’m the administrator of this facility...

Keltie’s thumb all but crushed the channel change button. She dialed past a few commercials before finally settling on an all day news channel. At the same time, a nurse came with a dinner tray for Chloe. To Keltie’ surprise—and great relief—the old woman began to eat straight away.

She let her finish before asking, gingerly, how she felt.

“I’m not sure,” Chloe answered. She looked at the TV. “Hospital food and Wolf Blitzer.”

“One makes you well while the other makes you sick again.”

“No, no. Don’t pick on Wolf. He’s only doing his job. When there’s news he has to report it.”

The old woman’s tone, along with the dreamy look in her eyes, made Keltie grin. “So you have a crush.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” came Chloe’s playful reply.

“Oh no Mom. Not a word. It’ll be our secret.”

The trailer on Sunset Lane looked terrible as it had in February. Seeing it made Keltie

groan. After doing so much punishment work for the school the last thing she needed was this. But here it was anyway: dirty laundry, dirty floors, dirty dishes. And bottles, of course, some empty, others not.

On the bright side, she had Cameron for a workmate. Janitor that he was, the mess did not perturb him in the least. He attacked it with full gusto, hitting the tables and counters first before moving down to the floors while Keltie handled the laundry and dishes. As a result the place got clean much faster than before, so that it was still light out by the time they left, though the sun was low and the skies were pale.

They rode in silence. As luck would have it, Cameron's route to Benedict Avenue took the truck directly to Bolt's house. Having no choice but to endure the ancient mansion's presence, Keltie waited for the traffic light at Pleasant and Main to change. Huge windows glowered in the dying light, sending a chill down her spine. Soon Bolt would be awake in the blackness beyond their curtains, if he wasn't already. But what were his plans? He'd been biding for so long.

"What do you know about this house?" she asked her dad all of a sudden.

At that same moment the light changed. "It's big," he said, driving off from its Greek pillars, its pedimented gable. "It's creepy. Cool, but creepy."

"So you don't know anything."

He laughed. "Not a damned thing, dear."

"Okay. Let me heave another question at you."

"Heave away."

"If you had to kill a vampire but you didn't believe in god, what would you do?"

"I would find my religion. Very fast." He spared her an odd look. "That's some question. Is your lit class covering Bram Stoker this month?"

"Tom Holland. Listen, Dad—"

"You believe in God, don't you?"

She froze. Now *that* question was out, lying on the seat between them like a haunted doll, Keltie wished she'd kept her mouth shut about the whole thing. Alas, too late. And today she didn't feel like telling a lie to Cameron, not after she'd been so straight with Chloe.

"I don't," she answered, looking at the trees around Pleasant Street Park.

A long time passed before he responded. She stole a glance at him when they reached West Elm, and then another when they turned onto Benedict. The man was smitten, no doubt about that. Struck voiceless by her words.

Rows of old, familiar houses flew by her window. Green lawns, blooming flowers. Keltie began to wonder if she should apologize to Cameron. Maybe she could take it all back, or pretend she'd been joking. Would he laugh? Probably not.

They were nearing the school. It was almost time for her to get out of the truck and go back to life as a bad egg student. She glanced at Cameron again. His eyes were on the road, doing their duty not to get them killed.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said. "I didn't mean to make a bad day worse."

"Nah," he replied absently, "you didn't. But when did you give up on Him? Do you remember?"

"I don't think I ever subscribed to any of it. The whole idea of a magic man in the sky...I remember it sounding silly to me right from the start."

A sigh came from the seat opposite. "Well, it's hard to believe in God when you've got a drunk for a mom and an asshole for a dad."

"Dad!"

“And that drunken mother? A big part of that is my fault, too.”

He pulled into the school parking lot. Evening had officially fallen. Both wings were lit up. Through the front door Keltie could see the empty desk where Mrs. Cobb sat during the day. One of the boys stood behind it now, talking on the phone.

“But I just want you to know, Keltie, that the old Cameron, the guy who was such a mess? He’s gone. Dead and buried.”

She wasn’t really seeing the school, or the boy. She just didn’t want the man sitting behind the wheel to know that her eyes were wet.

“I know he is, Dad,” she got out. “I’ve known since last year. You don’t have to beat yourself up.”

“*Somebody* needs to beat me up. God knows I’ve done enough of it to everyone else.”

Now she looked at him, and never mind her tears. Leaning over to give him a hug, she told him not to worry, that the two of them were better now. His head, nestled against the back of her own, moved with a nod.

“And once we save Mom, all three of us will be fixed. How does that sound?”

“Like one of your vampire fairy tales.”

That made Keltie shiver for a moment, but when she moved back to look at Cameron, he was smiling. “Vampires aren’t real, Dad,” she said, giving him a playful slap on the face. “You know that.”

“Of course I do.”

“*We’re* real. And we’re going to be okay.”

Leaving him to sit on these words of optimism, she kissed him on the cheek and opened the door. The late spring air smelled of living things. Flowers, tree bark, cut grass. She closed the door, and with a final wave to her dad, sprung to the school’s front porch, skipping its stone steps two at time.

Twenty-two: Belly of the Bull

As was typical during American History class, Keltie fell asleep at her desk.

"Miss Burke!" Mr. Johnson roared, making her almost fall from the chair. He smiled once he had her attention. His big, square head tilted, and for a moment Keltie was blinded by a ray of May sunshine that flared the lenses of his glasses. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

"My apologies," Keltie said.

Mr. Johnson blinked. "Where at?"

And though the joke wasn't funny in the least, everyone laughed.

"Do you really feel it's wise," he then continued, "to sleep in class a mere two weeks before final exams? In the front row? With your desk directly in front of mine?"

"No."

"Good girl. Now please name for me the five Great Lakes."

"Erie. Ontario. Superior. Huron. Michigan."

Johnson's smile faltered the tiniest bit. Still drowsy from dreaming, Keltie hardly noticed.

His next question came harder. "In what year was the state of Ohio inducted into the union?"

Yawning, Keltie answered: "1803."

"Who was president of the South during the Civil War?"

"Jefferson Davis."

"When did the California gold rush begin?"

"1848."

"Who found gold there that started the whole mess?"

"James W. Marshall."

Mr. Johnson looked at her for a long time. "Go back to sleep, Keltie," he growled. "I'll wake you up when the bell rings."

It was late night study sessions that exhausted her. Open books under a dim lamp. Coffee stolen from the cafeteria. Often times she would wake at two o'clock in the morning, slumped over her desk like a poisoned philosopher. But at least it seemed to be working. She'd answered Mr. Johnson's questions by rote.

Towards the end of May—one week before finals—Cameron gave the school permission to let her out for one day. A rummage sale at his church was gearing up, and hands were needed to erect displays and price mark items. At Keltie's request, he also invited Marty to join. The school allowed it, under condition that neither of the two minors would be left alone together for any reason. Cameron promised to keep them pried apart with a door wedge if necessary. Keltie didn't think it would be. She hadn't been seeing much of her boyfriend of late; thus, the very idea of being in the same room with him for an entire day made her giddy enough to be satisfied.

They rode to the church under bright, nourishing sunlight that had the maples in bloom. Air warm enough for summer rushed around them while the radio brayed baseball. In her most casual tone, Keltie asked after Mom. Cameron told her that she'd begun rehab, and things were going to be touch and go for a long, long time.

"I'll get over to her trailer this summer," Keltie promised. "Every day if I have to."

She stole a glance at Marty in the back seat. He flashed a smile to let her know things were a-okay. Then she looked at Cameron.

They're both mine, she thought, for no ready purpose. I've got two men in the truck with me and they're both mine. Not bad for a bad seed.

Five minutes later they were parked at the church. Cameron led them to a side door that opened onto a flight of basement stairs. The stairs opened onto a large room set with folding tables. Heaped over these tables was the mess they'd come here to sort.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Cameron said, catching the expression on Keltie's face.

"Said the priest to the altar boy."

He laughed. "Really, it's just a bunch of old clothes. All you do is fold them, and Mrs. Haschak will help with the pricing. She's around here somewhere."

Keltie went to the nearest table. There were perhaps ten in all, and all were mish-mashed with garments at least ten years out of date. Some were even older. She picked up a poodle skirt from the nineteen-fifties and wondered where the matching bobby-socks were. Not far from that lay a blue checkered blouse from what she guessed could have been World War II.

"You," Cameron was saying to Marty, "get a fun job."

"And what's that, sir?"

"You get to sort toys."

The Filipino immediately pumped his fist. "All right!"

"Oh come on, Dad!" Keltie whined. "I'm a girl, so I have to do the clothes?"

"That's right, baby," he said with a grin.

"Okay, there has got to be a social justice group in this town I can contact about that."

"Mrs. Haschak will help you."

She folded a pair of jeans. "Yeah, yeah. When she gets here we'll brew tea and swap cupcake recipes."

"Ooh," Marty called back as Cameron led him away, "let me know when they're ready to eat."

At this Keltie gave him the most grown-up response she could think of on the spur of the moment: She stuck out her tongue.

But her dad turned out to be right. While all the old clothes and long tables appeared formidable at first glance, they were little more than paper tigers at heart. Mrs. Haschak—a sweet little old lady with eyes that twinkled behind a pair of rimless glasses—arrived not ten minutes after Keltie was left alone. She proved herself helpful not only with doing the work, but with maintaining intelligent conversation as well. She asked Keltie what it was like to be young in 2017; she then told of what it was like to be young in 1967.

"Tumultuous," she said, gazing across the room as if the girl she'd once been would at any moment appear to lend them a hand. "Ever so tumultuous. All of the 1960s was like that. War. Assassinations. Protestations. Us kids, we were holding on to the end of a rope, being dragged towards a quagmire the magnates made us feel bad about resisting."

"Did you lose anyone in the war?" Keltie asked, just before realizing what a terrible question that was.

Yet Mrs. Haschak didn't seem to mind. "Oh yes," she answered. Her hands flapped out an old t-shirt as she spoke, folded it, placed it back on the table. "An older brother."

"I'm sorry. That was really stupid of me."

Her apology brought a smile to the old woman's lips. "Not at all, dear. I talk about Joseph all the time. To remember him, you see. Because I'm afraid once I stop remembering, why... then he truly will be gone, won't he?"

By four o'clock all of the folding was done. Keltie excused herself and went down the hall

to check on the men. She reached the doorway to the toy room...and froze. Cameron and Marty were sitting on the floor, playing with what looked to be a Fisher-Price parking garage.

Are you fucking kidding me? the crazy bitch asked.

Unable to believe her eyes, she watched as Marty rolled a toy car down a ramp, dinged a bell at a toy gas pump, laughed. Cameron had two wooden Little People posed next to a car wreck, presumably in the act of exchanging insurance numbers.

"I had the right of way," Cameron made one of the toys insist. Then, in a deeper voice, he answered for the other: "No, sir, you most assuredly did *not!*"

Not having enough heart to interrupt them, Keltie walked off. She made her way back to the stairs and then outside to light up a smoke. The day was still bright, still warm. Happy with the weather after so much rain and cold, she decided to walk to the end of State Street, where it intersected with West Main. It was a bad idea. Once at the corner, the line to Bolt's house became direct. A mere quarter mile separated her from its ancient facade.

Puffing away on her cigarette, Keltie gazed down the street. The house wasn't visible from here, of course, but she didn't need it to be. It had been standing in the same spot since 1830. Anyone curious enough to knock on the front door needn't have rushed for fear of time.

Keltie had no wish to knock on the door...but she was curious. Her last contact with Bolt had been three months ago, in February. For the umpteenth time she wondered what the hell that was supposed to mean. Had he died after jumping out Vera's window that night? Choked to death on Keltie's cigarette?

In a spur of the moment decision, she struck off towards the house. Her legs moved swiftly. The slim black purse she carried danced on the belt line of her denim skirt. Such confidence was a paradox. Keltie had no idea what she intended to do upon her arrival. Short of brooding at the foot of its front walk, what *could* she do?

You won't even catch a glimpse of Bolt. Not if he sleeps during the day like vampires are supposed to.

Yes, but....why on earth would she want to see Bolt anyway?

Understanding less and less of it all by the moment, she kept walking. Minutes later, the house at number 114 seemed to creep into view. Edge out from behind its neighbors like an animal from its den. She saw first the front lawn, with its broken water fountain, then its pillars, then its gargantuan windows. At the intersection of North Pleasant (where she'd waited for the light with Cameron a mere three weeks ago), she stopped.

Directly across from her, on a diagonal line, stood Wooster-Boalt. And oh! Was it huge! How could such a structure be anything but? Its architects had chosen the temple form of Greek styling. Keltie estimated each of its columns to be at least a hundred feet high, supporting a pedimented gable the length of a school gymnasium and more.

She cocked her head in effort to get a look through one of the upper windows. But despite the hour, they were dark. It made sense. She didn't think a murderous vampire would be terribly receptive to guests popping in at odd hours. He'd not leave the curtains pulled back, nor the front door wide open.

The front door came open.

Flabbergasted, Keltie watched a bald-headed old man step outside and disappear around the far corner of the house. A minute ticked by. Two minutes. Three. The old man did not return.

She trotted across the street in what she hoped was a casual vein, allowing the house to loom above her like an unsparing face on a movie screen. Alongside it she could see the old man's bald head, shining in the sun. He was knelt in the dirt, a spade in one hand, a hand fork

in the other. Gardening time. The spade jabbed, scooped, jabbed again. The man was either planting flowers or pulling weeds. Whichever, Keltie felt certain he'd not noticed—or even come close to noticing—the girl staring at him from afar.

Taking light steps so as to keep her boots quiet, she walked to the front door.

Her hand seized the latch, pulled. It clicked open. Inside was an anteroom. Beyond that lay a wide hall of hardwood, where antique furniture (a rocking chair, a clock, a gramophone) slept the sleep of eternal time. Keltie took a deep breath of musty air, held it, and let the door close behind her.

Okay, girl. What...the fuck...are you doing?

Still holding the breath, she entered the hall. To the left was a living room, a fireplace. More old furniture. Dead ahead, a flight of steps that looked wider than she was tall extended to the next floor.

Are you going to answer me or not?

Keltie entered the living room like a little girl lost. Alice down the deep black hole. Distantly, she could feel her lungs beginning to tighten. She breathed in. Old, dry air filled her chest. Of course it did. Like the hallway, this room had been decorated for a lost era. Nineteenth century furniture stood before a masonry fireplace. More hardwood floors. Candle sconces on the walls.

The room next to it offered more of the same. One oddity caught her eye, however: a chalkboard, three panels long, embedded into the wall. It was cracked. Bone-dry. Old beyond use. To try and write on it, she thought, would likely make the whole thing crash on the floor in a heap of pointed shards.

An archway on the right led her back to the hall. Now she was on the other side of the stairs, looking into a room full of books. A library. Such a room would ordinarily have compelled her to visit. Given the current scenario, she was not so foolish to court temptation here.

So what the fuck did you come for in the first place, you stupid bitch?

At last, the voice began to make sense. Keltie looked towards the anteroom. The front door was still shut. Through its glass panels she could see cars passing on West Main. Assuming her luck held out, she could walk straight down the hall and be gone before anyone knew.

Instead, she decided to open a small door opposite the library. It revealed a flight of steps leading into darkness. The basement.

A black switch on the wall activated the lights. Concrete flooring burst into view. Trying to see more, Keltie craned her head. It was no use. Even from here she could tell that the basement at number 114 was huge. If she wanted to see it all, she would need to go down.

Closing the door behind her, Keltie gave in to temptation. One step. Two steps. Three. Halfway down, she became acutely aware (all over again) of the hugeness of Wooster-Boalt. Except now...now it was right overtop of her. Massive slabs of stone and wood, a hundred and ninety years old. God knew how many shadows. Darkness cringing from slanted rays of dusty sunlight. Giant windows in rooms where time stood still. Forgotten secrets. Anguished entities.

The scene at the bottom did nothing to dispel these unsettling thoughts. Frozen in place, Keltie looked from one piece of furniture to the next. None of it came from the same era as what stood in the living room. All of this stuff, she guessed, was much older.

Older for a reason.

Keltie's eyes danced. She was in a torture chamber.

Her knowledge of such places did not extend deep. That mattered little here. A rack of molded wood hugged the wall, untouched—she hoped—since the time of its creation. Another rack, this one for the head and wrists, idled nearby. Next to that stood what appeared to be a water torture cell.

And in the center of the room, staring at her with blind eyes, was a large, bronze bull.

This was the piece that commanded her attention from the start. Keltie looked up at its frowning face, unable to get a handle on the moment. The bull had been crafted with loving care. Its huge horns looked ready to stab out at any moment; its snout looked ready to bellow war. Walking around its side, Keltie could see muscles sculpted in mid-ripple, shiny surfaces aglow in the pale light. Its tail, too long for the ceiling, curled around the torture cell instead, as if to fortify the glass.

How had such a magnificent thing come to be in this place?

The answer came less than a minute later, when she noticed a handle on its flank. Curious, Keltie grabbed it and pulled. Nothing happened. The bronze, heavy and strong, defied her. She pulled harder. Still no joy. Cursing, Keltie took the handle in both hands, and with one boot on the creature's flank, pulled for all her muscles were worth.

The flank broke open. It happened so fast Keltie was thrown backward. She tripped over a torture rack and went sprawling. Dust got into her eyes; gravel sprinkled her hair. But...

"I got the fucking thing open," she called out.

She stood, brushed herself off, and stared into a now gaping hole on the bull's side.

Jesus, she thought.

It was big enough for her to crawl into. Who was she kidding? The fucking thing was big enough for *two* of her to crawl into, stretch out, and read a book. Keltie peered inside. As she'd feared, the basement light did not penetrate deep enough to see. She leaned further. Half her body was now inside the bull. Heavy air smelling of dead animals filled her lungs. But there was nothing to see. Or if there was, lack of light prevented further discovery. Anyhow, she'd gotten the gist. The bull's purpose had nothing to do with hamburgers or handsome Spaniards in *traje de luces*. It was a prison cell. Ready to leave, she took a step back—

And was shoved the other way by a pair of large, rough hands.

The bull took her easily. Keltie fell all the way in, hitting her face on cold bronze, and before she could get herself turned around to identify her attacker, the flank cover slammed closed. **BANG!**

There was a click as the handle locked. In the pitch blackness Keltie became powerless. The bull had her.

"HEY!" she screamed. "HEY!"

Panic rising by the second, she stumbled forward. Her hands touched more bronze. But when they pushed, nothing happened. She'd barely been able to move the cover from outside; in here, blind and running out of breath, she had no chance.

She began to pound on the bronze with her fists. Useless. Her knuckles broke open; sticky blood dripped from the wounds. "HELP ME! HELP ME PLEASE!"

"There's no one to help you down here, little girl," a crazed, off-key voice called back. "No one at all."

Now she tried kicking the door with her boots. The heels struck metal once, twice, three times. But the damned thing refused to budge. And she couldn't see. She wasn't even sure where to kick, or how high.

"I can only guess," the voice continued, "that you are the troublesome Miss Keltie Burke.

The master has spoken of you many times. Warned me to keep an eye out. Keep an eye out, shut a girl in." The voice laughed shrilly at this, though Keltie barely heard. She had burst into terrified tears.

"GET ME OUT! GET ME OUT OF HERE OH PLEASE!"

"I hear you kicking and screaming, but I'm afraid I cannot accommodate your request. The master will be most indubitably pleased by this turn of events. Oh yes. Oh yes indeed."

"MARTY! MARTY!"

"Is the floor getting hot yet?"

Keltie stopped. She'd assumed that the heat—and the increasingly stuffy air—was a product of her own terror at being shut in. Suddenly it seemed like more. She felt along the floor of the prison, fingers scurrying like bugs. And indeed...it was hot. Almost hot enough to cause pain.

"What are you DOING?" she shrieked.

"Burning you alive, little girl!" the voice sang back joyfully. "Cooking you like a fish! A nice, pretty fish, which the master will most indubitably—most *indubitably*—find delightful!"

Keltie crawled towards what she hoped was the front of the bull. What little air she had left would soon be gone. Groping at the walls, she found—or thought she found—the bull's neck. There came a reprieve, a light breath of fresher oxygen, and then it was gone.

"Indubitably!" the voice continued to sing. "Indubitably, little lady!"

The wall nearest Keltie suddenly became too hot to touch. She yelped, leaped back, fell sprawling into the bull's belly. Another scream tore from her throat, wasting precious air.

I can't breathe! I can't breathe! Somebody help me I CAN'T BREATHE!

Heaving the last few gasps left, Keltie stretched her neck back far as it would go. The walls were hotter by the moment. Soon, her boots would begin to melt. She was about to be cooked alive, just like the crazy voice said.

Her lungs took in a deep, fuming breath. And for fear of there not being another, she held it. Held it while everything around her waited. The blinding black, the scorching heat. The brazen bull and the crazy man. Hell, even the house itself, Wooster-Boalt, number 114. Everything waited for Keltie Burke to die.

"Yes," she heard the voice say, as if it knew the tale had come to an end. "Yes, Miss Burke. You will die. You will die, and the master will be most indubitably—"

A hard, heavy thud cut the line off, followed by another that sounded like a body hitting the floor. Then the latch rattled—

And the bull's flank was practically torn from its hinges.

Two strong, dark arms reached for Keltie. She felt them pull her out like she was nothing more than a paper doll. For the time being at least, that was exactly what she'd become.

"Keltie! Come on, baby, talk to me! Say something, sweetheart!"

"Marty?" she muttered up at a blurred, smiling face. "That you?"

He answered that it was, just before a coughing fit took her, and she went from paper to rags in his arms.

"I'm okay," she got out. "I'm okay."

"You don't look okay."

"I need a few minutes. Can't walk just yet."

"You're not walking anywhere. I've got you."

"What happened?"

In effort to answer her own question, Keltie turned her head to see the bald gardener lying in a thick puddle of blood.

"I noticed you missing," Marty said. "It didn't take long for me to...fear the worst, you know."

She looked up at him. "So you followed me here?"

"Sort of. I told your dad we were going on a coffee run and borrowed his truck."

"Well I'm glad you did," she sighed, placing her head on his chest. "Because I was a dead girl, Marty. That bull—"

"It's called a brazen bull. It's a Greek torture device."

"I don't care what it's called. I just want to be away from it."

"Consider yourself gone."

He got as far as the steps, still holding her in his arms, before somebody else in the basement began to knock on a door. The echo of knuckles on wood reached the torture chamber from one of the other rooms.

"What's that?" Keltie asked, digging her nails into Marty's back.

Then Bolt's voice, distant but not distant enough, called out: "Lloyd? Lloyd, where are you? The lid is stuck again."

Keltie's blood turned to ice. Gaping at Marty, she ordered him to get them both out. He did not need to be told twice. His boots hit the stairs running. They were too eager. Marty tripped and fell down on one knee, bumping a cracked vase from beneath the railing. It struck the floor and shattered.

"WHO'S THAT?" Bolt's voice boomed.

A heavy crash of something being smashed to bits followed. Keltie screamed at Marty to run. As they reached the top step a shadow fell over the room below.

"GET BACK HERE! GET BACK HERE, *KELTIIIEEE!*"

"Put me down, Marty! NOW!"

They ran down the hall side by side. Marty's elbow knocked over a phonograph. Keltie's hip struck a pretty little end table, which tipped, taking an antique carafe with it. Shards of glass spun across the floor.

"**KELTIE!**" Bolt bellowed. His feet, heavy enough to shake the walls, were on the basement steps. "**I'M GOING TO BITE OFF YOUR HEAD! *BITE OFF YOUR HEAD!***"

They reached the anteroom. Marty grabbed the front door and got it open just as Bolt appeared in the hall. He was a sight to behold. Two yellow eyes shined beneath a mop of messy black hair. Jagged fangs, sallow as the late afternoon light, stabbed at the floor. His hands were giant spiders; his feet were bear claws.

As Keltie watched, one of the spiders wriggled an appendage back and forth. *Naughty, naughty, little girl. You came uninvited.*

But Bolt did not come closer than the foot of the stairs. Like Marty, he seemed rooted to the spot. Unlike Marty, he was smiling.

"Run," he said in a guttural voice. "Fast as you can. It won't matter. When the sun goes down...I'll find you."

"Why can't you just leave her alone?" Marty was somehow able to ask. "She never meant for any of this to happen."

"I don't care what anyone *means*, boy. Good intentions, bad intentions. Plans and improvisations. Bah! I hunt. I kill."

"Because you're an animal," Keltie scowled.

"And when I kill *you*," Bolt said, pointing at her heart, "I will feel more like a beast than ever. I intend to be gluttonous with every bite of flesh that I take. It will be a most satisfying murder. And after I'm done...I'll chew on your pretty little bones."

Keltie stared at the vampire. Speech failed her. The man was huge. The man was powerful. His teeth were like knives; the claws on his hands looked strong enough to cut steel. And he meant every single word he said. For all intents and purposes, Keltie Burke, female, sixteen years old, five feet, two inches tall, would soon be dead. Another girl on a milk carton. Another pile of bones discarded in the woods for some hunter's dog to find. Another newspaper article. And ultimately, another headstone in the graveyard. Dead.

"You can't," she told him.

"I will," he replied.

Then Marty stepped in front of her. He edged her through the doorway. Sunlight struck her face. But it was weakening. Weakening...while the shadows of the coming night grew stronger.

Together, she and Marty got into her dad's truck. On the way back to the church, neither of them could think of a thing to say.

Twenty-three: Night Flight

But they saw nothing of Bolt that night.

Had he come for her head as promised, Keltie would have known in advance. Like a ghost, she hovered at her window. The streets remained empty. The trees likewise. Strangers on the sidewalk made her jump, but no one approached the school. Chatter in the hall lay at an ebb as well. After dark, everyone went straight to their rooms to study. At ten o'clock Marty knocked on the door. He'd promised to stay with her no matter what the consequences. Keltie fairly yanked him into the room before slamming the door and relocking it. Then she threw her arms round his neck. At eleven, two giggling girls passed in the hall.

Marty kept stern vigil. He asked for the window seat so Keltie could lie down. She refused him, feeling that her senses, trained over the past year to a fine point when it came to detecting danger, would be better off placed on the front line of defense. Also...she was afraid she might fall asleep.

At midnight he brewed coffee with the small pot she kept for test cramming. They drank without much use for talk. What was there to talk about anyway, besides vampires? Keltie didn't want it; she didn't need it. The bastard Bolt was out there somewhere, and talking about him just made the whole idea even more frightening.

When the sun goes down...I'll find you.

He wouldn't need to look hard.

At one, Marty made another pot. But like it or no, Keltie felt the caffeine beginning to fail. She slurped down a third mug between yawns. Whilst filling a fourth, she remembered an old deck of Penelope's cards hidden under the bed. A few hands of poker provided temporary reprieve. They even managed to talk a little: school, parents, teachers. Periodically she would check the window, where nothing beyond begged reporting. It was like February all over again. High alert beneath quiet skies.

At three-thirty she hit the wall. Exhausted beyond all usefulness, she collapsed onto her bed, leaving Marty to hold watch until dawn. At nine-thirty—two hours late for class—she woke to an empty room. A note in Marty's handwriting lay on the desk. *Going back to my room now. It's light out. See you at lunchtime.*

A knock made her jump. She opened the door to one of the wing's mousy prefect girls. The girl wanted to know why she'd not reported to class. Keltie told her she was ill, but she would be back on her feet in time for tomorrow.

"Tomorrow's Saturday," the prefect girl said.

"Monday then," Keltie assured.

"Cool."

"Yeah."

Except by Monday she might already be dead.

That afternoon Cameron drove her back to the rummage sale. The basement was now open to the public, and in full swing. Twenty or thirty little old ladies milled about the tables, while children's laughter drifted from the toy room. Keltie made her way to the cash register. Here she found Mrs. Haschak totting up purchases.

"Need a break?" she asked.

"Keltie! Why yes, maybe for just a few minutes. Is your father around?"

"He ducked off to polish the pews. Hay fever going around. Sneezy congregations."

Mrs. Haschak grinned. "Oh you!"

"Go have some coffee, Mrs. H. I've got the helm."

"Young lady!" a third voice exclaimed out of nowhere. Keltie turned to see an ancient woman with a suitcase-sized purse over her shoulder. "You shouldn't dress like that here! You look like—"

"Cyndi Lauper, I know."

"I was about to say Gina Lollobrigita!"

"Who?"

Business remained steady until closing time. When the last of that day's patrons had gone, Keltie and Mrs. Haschak totaled their registers, tied all the money into a bag, and said their goodbyes.

"I hope you'll be back tomorrow," the old woman said.

"I should be," Keltie replied. "I've been tied to my schoolbooks for too long."

"Oh! That reminds me!"

And without another word Mrs. Haschak bustled herself over to a crooked hat rack. Appalled, Keltie watched her select the ugliest church derby she had ever seen. The flower was pink; the hat was green.

"Mrs. H, you don't have to—"

Beneath the hat, the woman found a long, silk ribbon of lovely dark red. Handing it to Keltie, she said: "Try this in your hair. I thought of you the moment I saw it."

Keltie took the ribbon. It felt soft as powder in her hand. "Wow. It's very pretty."

"Indeed."

She tied it into a bow, then curtsied best as she could remember. Mrs. Haschak declared her to look marvelous.

"Thank you!"

"Blood is your color," the old woman said with a smile. "Vibrant and full of life. Wear that whenever you need strength."

"So...all the time?"

"If need be, my dear. If need be."

Cameron took her to dinner at Berry's. A chill wind had gotten up, surprising Keltie with its zeal. Her skirt flapped while Cameron held the door. Inside, talk of a storm floated between ringing tables. Keltie ordered a chicken breast fillet sandwich with french fries and tried not to think of how happy Bolt would be to kill her in the rain.

Halfway through the meal, all chatter came to a halt as one of Norwalk's fire trucks blew by the window, its siren wailing. Keltie listened to it fade. It had turned onto Benedict Avenue and was now heading south.

"I wonder if McDonald's caught fire," Cameron mused.

Five minutes later another truck passed. Tires screeched as it made hard right onto Benedict. A horn honked.

"Damn," Cameron said, "I hope it's not the hospital."

No, the crazy, morbid bitch in Keltie's head whispered, *it's not the hospital. You know what it is, right, girl? The school's on fire. Bolt wants to burn the fucking place down.*

"That is the stupidest thing ever," she said aloud.

Her dad shrugged. "Sorry. Maybe it's just some guy's field out past five-points."

"I didn't mean you, Dad. I meant—"

"W! L! K! AAAAAAARRRRRRRE!" a radio behind the bar suddenly chirped out. A news bulletin

followed. And it was pretty much spot on as the morbid bitch said it would be. *“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. We have just been informed by the Norwalk Police Department that a fire has broken out at the Benedict Avenue Norwalk Youth Correctional Facility. All traffic is advised to please route travel AWAY from the south end of town—”*

“Dad?” Keltie snapped. “We need to leave. Now.”

“—it has been confirmed to be quite a large fire. The south wing of the school is currently burning out of control—”

“Dad!”

Unable to contain herself, Keltie made for the door. Outside, sirens screamed. She watched three police cars fly down Benedict. Then an old woman appeared from the flower shop and asked what was going on.

“Doing any hiring?” Keltie asked.

The old woman grimaced. “You know what? I’m getting tired of people asking me that.”

“Well, maybe you should go fuck yourself then.”

“Young lady! I beg your pardon!”

“No!” Keltie growled, just as Cameron joined her.

“What’s going on?” he asked in a much less demanding tone.

“Take me back to the school.”

“Keltie, the school is on fire.”

“NOW, Dad!”

He drove fast as the night would allow, adhering to Keltie’s instructions to use Pleasant instead of Benedict, then take Norwood to Christie Avenue. Here they could drive no further. The end of Christie had been blocked, and there were sirens flashing everywhere.

“Okay,” Cameron said after parking the truck. “Let’s slow down and think about what we’re —”

Keltie threw open the door and jumped out.

“Wait a second!” her dad yelled.

She couldn’t wait. Her hair whipped in the wind; her eyes blazed. She ran until her legs ached, until her lungs screamed for breath. Then she ran some more.

Firemen stood everywhere in front of the DC. Orders were being hollered. Hoses blasted water. Pushing her way through a group of spectators, Keltie saw that the upper windows of the south wing were mightily ablaze. Black smoke poured into the sky.

“Keltie, what are you *doing*?” someone shrieked. It was Cameron. He grabbed her shoulder, spun her back. “You’re getting in the way of these men!”

“It’s Marty!” she screamed. *“Marty’s in there!”*

She tore off without another word, dodging her way towards the north wing. No one else seemed to be paying her the slightest bit of attention, which was great. Grand. Perfect. Keeping to the shadows as much as possible, she made her way to the back lawn. More men with hoses stood here. Then a body was carried out the back door, which nearly caused her to faint. It was a woman, slumped over the shoulder of the fireman. Keltie saw gray hair, a pair of glasses.

“Mrs. Cobb! Mrs. Cobb!”

One of the firemen turned his head. “Ma’am, you’ll have to leave!”

“Is Mrs. Cobb all right?”

“I don’t know that, ma’am.”

“Is there anyone else in the building?”

“Ma’am, please—”

She bolted through the open door, leaving his further commands to die in her wake. A haze met her. Breathable, but a harbinger of worse to come. Still, she knew Marty's room number. If she could just get upstairs and make sure he'd gotten free—

Stupid idiot! You're gonna run upstairs in a burning building to check for some guy who might not even be there?

Fuck you, bitch!

She hit the steps like a streak of lightning, taking them two at a time. But with speed came a price. Running an incline depleted her breath. Her chest began to throb and heave for air, very little of which remained in the boys' wing. Climbing past the top step, Keltie ducked to the floor. The smoke had grown thicker by far. And though she could hardly see, sounds of hungry fire pressed from every direction.

If he's still here you're going to die with him!

Thank you. Thank you for that vote of confidence.

Marty's room was 208. A long way down the hall. Moving as best she could, Keltie counted each door she passed. She opened the eighth one onto pitch black room.

"Marty!" she coughed.

No good. He wasn't here. Or if he was—

Then he's fucking dead.

Didn't I tell you to fuck off?

She crossed the hall, felt for another door, found one, opened it....

More blackness.

"Marty!"

The fire raged on. Keltie now felt certain it was in the attic, burning framework. Were it somewhere else—like, say, *beneath* her—she'd surely be dragging about two hundred extra cigarette packs worth of smoke. But no. Things were cool.

Yeah, real cool, girl. You're now trapped in a building that's going to collapse on you instead of suffocate you. Groovy. I love it.

Okay, one more time for the cheap seats: FUCK! OFF!

"HEY! HEY! Somebody help me!"

Keltie crawled into the room. She looked left, right. "Where are you?"

Nothing but dirty haze for a few seconds. Then, weakly: "Closet. Closet."

Her hands pawed in every direction. They found an empty potato chip bag, a bedpost, a coin. But the closet door wouldn't be out in the middle of the room; that idea was just stupid. So she crawled until her hands found a wall. Then, a doorknob. She opened it to find Marty with his hands tied to clothes rod. He looked bleary and red-eyed from smoke inhalation. Sweat poured from his face. Screaming his name, Keltie got to work on the rope.

"Keltie?" he asked. "That you?"

"Who else?" The rope was thin and dry, yet wouldn't yield under her fingers. "Did Bolt do all this?" she asked.

He smiled back. "Who else?"

"Well we need to get you out of here."

Something outside gave way to the fire, causing a heavy crash. Keltie screamed again. Soon the ceiling would fall, crush them both to death.

"You know something?" she said, suddenly furious. "I could burn this rope with my lighter if girls' clothing came with some fucking pockets to put one in!"

"Try *my* pockets," Marty suggested.

She did—and *eureka!* A cigarette lighter!

"You're awesome, Keltie," she heard him say. "I love you."

"Tell me that again after we're out of this place!"

He nearly fell on her after the rope succumbed. His weight threw her backward. Then they did a clumsy sack-race walk to the window, which Keltie, from pure adrenaline, threw open with one arm, breaking one of its glass panes.

"You're gonna have to jump," she told Marty.

"We're two stories up."

"And bananas are yellow and water is wet. I don't give a shit, dear."

"Where did Bolt set the fire?"

"In the attic, I think."

He shook his head. "What an idiot. Why do that? Why not set it underneath—"

"Marty, goddammit, *jump!*"

And so he jumped. And Keltie had time to see, just before Bolt came to sweep her up to the clouds, that the firemen had noticed them talking, and were ready with a trampoline. Then the entire scene rapidly became smaller and smaller. Because Bolt had grabbed her. Bolt had her in his clutches, like an eagle with a fish. And they were going up and up and up into the stormy night sky.

"Idiot?" a growl asked from somewhere in the dizzying wind. "Did I hear one of you call me an *idiot?*"

Keltie could not answer. Three times tonight, her breath had been stolen: once by running, once by smoke, and now...vertigo. They were high above the trees of Norwalk. Cold rain sliced the air. She looked up to find a fanged monster gliding on a cape large enough to blot out the clouds. A scowl split the monster's features. Its red eyes came alight.

Lightning and thunder crashed over Benedict Avenue. Bolt made a hard turn that brought a cry of terror to Keltie's lips. Then, apropos of seemingly nothing, he asked:

"What time is it, girl?"

Keltie closed her eyes. She didn't want to see any more of Norwalk from this angle. No way. They were perhaps two hundred feet over the nearest roof—

Unless you counted the courthouse roof, which was quite a great deal higher than the rest. And the courthouse tower, of course, which was higher still. And that tower's gigantic clock face...which now loomed close enough for Keltie to reach out and touch.

"What time is it?" Bolt asked again.

"I—"

BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG!

Keltie screeched. But the striking clock crushed it. A boot on a flower. A hammer on egg shells. Its enormous white face took up the whole world; its black hands threatened to choke her.

BONG! BONG!

"*WHAT TIME?*" Bolt screeched back, plenty loud enough and more.

Keltie tried to cover her ears. She couldn't quite get her hands where they needed to be, however, while the mammoth clock continued to rip the night to pieces.

BONG! BONG! BONG!

"*TIME FOR YOU TO DIE!*"

And with that, he flew her down West Main Street, towards the only place in the world she knew she wouldn't have a chance against the likes of Bolt. A place where she'd already been beaten once. A place where she'd nearly died.

The vampire flew her back to his lair. Number 114, Wooster-Boalt.

Twenty-four: Big Fight in a Big House

They reached the house under pouring skies. Black as a giant hole, the roof of Wooster-Boalt swept into view. Then the vampire dove, bringing it closer and closer. Keltie let out yet another scream. She was certain he meant to dash her against the grainy shingles, or perhaps eviscerate her skull on one of at least four chimneys visible in the murk.

Instead, he brought her down gently as a leaf, until his toes touched the back lawn, at which point he glided over the wet grass to a small, unassuming door.

"Keys," he snarled.

Keltie blinked. "Huh?"

"Reach into my pocket and grab the keys. I'd have Lloyd at the door...but then you killed him, didn't you? Of course you did."

Her trembling hand found one of his pockets and dove in. It returned with a sealed packet of orange tin foil. *Ribbed, for HER pleasure!*

Bolt knocked it away. "Not that! My other pocket!"

She reached again and this time came back with the keys. Bolt snatched them, unlocked the door, pitched her inside.

She nearly hit her head on the coffin.

Black as death, it lay in the center of a candle-lit room. The lid was open. Clean, crisp pillows glowed on a fluffy white interior. What was this? Bolt's bedroom?

"No," he said, as if she'd spoken the question aloud. "This is what was known in the nineteenth century as a mourning room, girl. Residential funerals were a common thing. A loved one would die and be paid his last respects in the comfort of his own home, leaving family members to squabble over who got what, and for how much." The vampire's head tilted with an evil grin. "Lovely, yes? Sibling affection. And this house was built in 1830. Imagine how many families have come and gone. How many corpses rotted the tiniest bit in this very room before being fed to the worms."

"I don't understand you," Keltie said.

And in the flickering light, Bolt's fangs seemed to grow larger. "You never have, girl. So let me dispense with the poetry: Yours will be the next corpse to rot in this room. I'm going to tear out your throat. Then I will conduct a very private but proper funeral. It's the least I can do for the feats you've managed."

"If that thing in Sandusky had left my friend alone," Keltie said, moving backward, "none of this would have happened."

"Where are you going? I didn't give you permission to leave."

"Give me back Penelope, Bolt. Then we're even. What do you say?"

His grin widened. "Funny girl. In the face of death, she laughs. I'm so old and yet I learn new things every day."

"There's a word for that," Keltie said.

"Tell me."

"Enlightenment."

She threw a candle at his face. His hand moved to block it, but by then Keltie had yanked open the room's other door. A bellow of rage chased her down the hallway. The front entrance waited at the opposite end, about a hundred feet off. Keltie didn't much like her chances with that. She'd never get it open before Bolt caught her. So she turned right past the stairs. The heels of her boots slid on hardwood flooring. She cut right again and ran back

the way she'd come. The house's enormous living room blurred past, until she skidded to a stop at the old chalkboard. A third right would lead her to the library. Keltie was about to do that very thing when the gloom began to echo with Bolt's deep, guttural laugh.

He'd followed her, calmly. Copied her footsteps. Now he was a mere fifty feet from where she stood.

The laughing stopped. "Ready?" he asked.

"For what?"

Bolt charged. His cape billowed; his snarl was like a dog's. In seconds he would dive and rip Keltie in half. She could think of only one thing to do.

She charged back.

Grinning, Bolt dove. But before he could strike, Keltie slid on her knees, arching back to let her hair touch the floor. The vampire's confused, furious scream cut the air. Then he struck the chalkboard full force, smashing it to pieces.

Keltie turned to find Bolt crouched among shards of two hundred year old slate—*the house was used as a seminary for girls*, Marty once said. He picked up several of the pieces, cradled them in his hands. The impact had broken the clasp of his cape. Dark fabric lay at his feet, a twisted heap of nonsense. But Bolt did not seem to care. It was the shards he cradled, caressed. All but wept for.

Then his eyes flashed. "Bitch! Look what you did! *Look!*"

"No. Not me."

Bolt winged a shard at her head. Keltie dove, landed on her belly. The shard had missed by maybe an inch. But it *had* missed. And she realized that, since bringing her to the house, Bolt had lost his momentum.

Luck and speed and skill! The crazy bitch sang. *Oh my!*

Keltie was about to send a *thank you* when a hand grabbed her wrist and yanked her into the hall. Terrified the old bald man had somehow come back to life, Keltie twisted her head—

Marty stared at her. "Hello. Would you care to stand up so we can get the hell out of here?"

"I suppose," she said, jumping to her feet. "If you really insist. Did you bring my dad's truck?"

"It's out back."

Keltie looked down the hall. She could see the mourning room, candles glowing. Part of the coffin. "You came through there?" she asked.

"Yep. Where else?"

A dark shape appeared at the end of the hall, blocking the candles. Bolt. "My, my," he called. "Another visitor. I'm sorry, young man, but the coffin is for Miss Burke. Don't fret though. My brazen bull holds boys just as easily as girls."

"Fuck you!" Marty yelled back.

Bolt walked towards them, his gait swift. Having no desire to linger and chat, Keltie pulled her boyfriend up the stairs. A second hallway waited at the top. Rows of old doors, old bedrooms. Giant windows rattling on stormy gusts of rain.

Now what? she wondered.

The question got answered when Bolt appeared at the far end of the hall. "The servants' stairs are nowhere near pretty as the main," he said. "That doesn't mean they're not useful."

Marty stepped forward. For the first time, Keltie noticed he held a book. It didn't take long to figure out which book: The Holy Bible.

Oh no, Marty, no...

“Then it came about at the end of forty days,” he quoted, approaching the vampire, “Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made, and he sent forth a raven—”

Bolt grabbed him by the throat and lifted. The Bible clunked to the floor.

“Raven,” Bolt said, fangs caught in a flash of lightning. “Black bird. The bird that came back with nothing. Am I nothing to you, boy? *Nothing?*”

With a snarl of disgust, he threw Marty down the hall. The Filipino’s limp body disappeared through an open door. Bolt reached for Keltie next, but she was gone too quick, running fast as she could to Marty. He was crumpled beneath a window. Still as a rock.

“Marty! Marty are you all right?”

“You’re not going to believe this,” he muttered weakly, “but I’m starting to like this house.”

She drew back. “Yeah. That’s fucked up.”

“Go get the Bible.”

“Why?”

His eyes rolled. “Because Bolt’s a vampire, stupid. You can kill him with it.”

“Only if you believe in God, Marty.”

“Keltie,” the boy said, “there has to be something in that book for you to believe.

Something. Find it.”

She glanced over her shoulder. No one looked back. Lightning flashed the walls; thunder pounded the windows. But Bolt had gone.

“I don’t know, Marty,” she said. “I just don’t know.”

“I do. Now go. Leave me here. If we win we win, and if we lose we lose.”

She glared at him, ready to challenge this proclamation. This wasn’t a beauty contest or a baseball game. They were talking about life. Breath and blood. How could he be so cavalier towards having it stolen?

“Okay,” she said, without knowing why. “Will you wait here?”

“Nah. I’m really in the mood for a strawberry sundae about now.”

“Yeah, me too.” She kissed his forehead. “Wait here.”

The hallway remained empty. Lightning and thunder beckoned, but her boots moved with deliberate slowness. On her left was the railing. To her right, more bedrooms, more places for Bolt to hide. Keltie moved like a girl underwater, certain a terrible fish would soon strike. Another flash of lightning revealed a shape on the floor: Marty’s Bible. In spite of his faith, she had no idea what she could do with it. Or rather, *undo* with it.

“Keltie,” Bolt’s amused voice suddenly rang out.

Keltie nearly fainted. Ducking down, she grabbed hold the banister and waited for her chest to loosen.

The voice became a laugh. “I can see you, Keltie. I can smell you as well. You smell of fear. Very wise. Because of course, all wisdom begins with fear, yes?”

She looked left and right, trying to see him. But Bolt did not seem to be in the hallway. Looking up, she could see he’d not chosen to hover, monster-like, on the ceiling, either.

“I am *everywhere!*” Bolt laughed. “Lurking in your libraries. Hiding in your dreams.”

“Show yourself,” Keltie tried to yell, with a voice that lacked spirit.

“You’re dead when I do.”

She picked up the Bible. The feel of its leather cover gave her courage, but only a little. Now she needed a plan. Run downstairs? She could perhaps escape by that route—get outside the way she’d come in.

It wasn’t an option. Not with Marty left behind.

She peered into the shadows. At the end of the hall, faintly visible, rose a second flight of

stairs. They were narrow and plain. Attic stairs.

Up you go, girl.

Yeah. Any particular reason?

Not knowing whether Bolt would suddenly pounce for the kill or not, Keltie walked on. One step. Two steps. Three. A rogue breeze lifted curtains in silent rooms. A clock ticked. Five steps. Six.

This house was built in 1830...imagine how many families have come and gone.

And how many people, she wondered, had died in this dark, gigantic place?

She reached the stairs and started to climb.

"Ah!" Bolt's delighted voice echoed. "You want to see more of the house! I'm flattered. Please indulge."

On the half-landing a flash of light revealed something with raven hair and no face. Keltie screamed at the mannequin, tearing past in blind panic. At the top was a T intersection. She turned left, peered into a small bedroom, went right. A carbon copy bedroom lay here. Nothing else.

"Forgetting something?" Bolt asked, and his voice was close now. He was somewhere in the attic.

Flustered, Keltie stood at the top step. Where else could there be to go? Back to the living room?

Her eye caught gleaming metal on the wall. A latch. It held a small, sideways door in place. Slowly, Keltie unhooked it. The door swung...

And in a tremendous room of shadows, Bolt stood waiting.

Wooden beams larger than any Keltie had seen in her life criss-crossed an oval window of stormy night. Planks, struts, ceiling joists. A collar beam big as an oak tree. She'd seen Wooster-Boalt's living accommodations and knew them better than she'd ever intended. Now, she was seeing its frame. The bones that held it all together.

Along with its owner—Bolt.

Confident as an owl, he stood smiling on one of the joists. Musty air, unsettled by the storm, ruffled his clothes.

"Come in," the vampire invited, raising his arms. "Don't let the beams frighten you. They're large, but they're only wood. And if you fall"—the palms of his hands turned up—"the floor's not far. Maybe twenty feet."

Keltie was not frightened. Bolt had no idea of this until, in one deft motion, she rolled through the door and found a beam of her own for balancing. Then his head tilted...and his smile faded.

Mister, she thought, as her boots began to strut on the beam, *you just made a colossal mistake.*

"A gymnast act won't save you," he warned. But he was walking the other way, circling to the east while Keltie moved west.

She hopped to another joist, barely needing to look. She'd done difficult maneuvers on beams much smaller than these. Scales, arabesques. Split leaps and handstands. Maybe Bolt would win anyway. Maybe he couldn't be beaten. But whether he knew it or not, the battleground belonged to her.

He came at her with three tremendous leaps. His legs were quick, his roar dominant. Keltie moved quicker. She found a spanning plate, seized it, and swung to another joist. Undeterred, Bolt skidded to a stop and charged again. This time Keltie ducked. The vampire flew by to strike a second plate at full speed. Chips of wood cut the air. Howls of pain and

fury tore out in zig-zagged flashes of lightning. Keltie jumped across the attic, taking joists like river stepping stones. He laughed when she slipped, then laughed some more when she found a broken piece of brick and threw it at him like the girl she was.

"Well now," he smiled, "looks like you won't be making any cricket teams in the near future. And you seem to be breathing heavy. Tired, are we?"

Keltie did not allow her expression to change. But the vampire was right. Doubtless realizing as much, Bolt came at her again. She had perhaps two seconds to decide what to do. Keep jumping around until she ran out of breath completely? Leap from the joist and take her chances on the attic floor? Both felt like certain death. Bolt was older, stronger, wiser. She could not hope to last in a prolonged match with him. And he was almost upon her. Almost here to eat her alive.

Keltie could think of only one trick.

She turned her back

Now she could not see Bolt, but she could hear him just fine. His rushing steps, his happy laugh. *Click, click, click*, on the beam, just like Santa Claus. Keltie waited another half-second before bending down to lean on Marty's Bible with both hands. With her other leg, she kicked hard as she could. Her foot struck Bolt directly under the chin, sending him off the beam. He fell and struck the floor like a lump of coal.

"That's called a Needle Scale," she said to his motionless body. "Part of the gymnast act that won't save me."

Disgusted, she threw the Bible at Bolt's face—

And his eyes flew open. He caught the book, sprang to his feet, and smiled up at her.

"Surely," he asked, mocking incredulity, "you weren't relying upon *this*? Oh yes," he went on, "I heard you that night. *The girl doesn't believe in God.*"

"You were listening," Keltie said.

"Everyone hears a heretic. They provide an excuse for outrage. Here!"

Bolt tossed the book. It hit Keltie's chest, where she struggled for a moment to control her grip.

"Read me some passages," the vampire then urged. "Something for a funeral perhaps. You know why."

"I'm not dead yet."

"Open the book Keltie. The god you abandoned awaits."

Keltie looked at her hands. In them lay Marty's Bible. Leather-bound. Rough about the edges. One of at least a million copies all over the world.

"Show me," Bolt challenged, "what a penitent girl can do. Open your heart to...*God.*"

He spat this last in pure contempt before climbing to rejoin Keltie on the beam. Slowly then, he began to close in. She moved backward until the wall touched her shoulders. From here she had nowhere else to go. Bolt—and Bolt's house—had her cornered.

"Last chance," he said. "Make me laugh before you die. Ask God to forgive you, you weak little girl."

There has to be something in that book for you to believe. Find it.

Keltie swallowed once. Twice. The book, unopened, pressed beneath her breasts. "My grace..." she stammered.

Bolt's smile got wider. He was loving every second of this, she knew. Every clumsy, inept second.

"My grace is sufficient for thee: For my strength is made perfect in weakness."

Bolt stopped. And for just one moment, his composure warbled on the beam. "Open it," he

commanded. "Your memories are a sham, girl. Mustn't trust them. Let the Lord remind you."

"No," Keltie said. "He doesn't need to. *Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities*—"

"Stop that!" Bolt was trembling again, and his hands had gone to his head.

"—*that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*"

"I'm warning you, bitch! Open the book!"

"*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge*—"

She watched the vampire double over in pain and fight to keep his balance.

"—*but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*"

"Cunt! Whore!"

"...*hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother...*"

Bolt screamed, and Keltie could see smoke rising from his clothes. This was not a good thing no matter what passages from the good book she managed to remember. Too late now, though. The die were cast. What would happen would happen.

"*The lot is cast into the lap,*" she suddenly yelled, "*but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord!*"

And still screaming, Bolt went up in heavy flames. He burned for a few moments before his body tumbled from the beam, leaving embers in its wake. It hit the floor hard and lay still.

Keltie let the pyre burn, but not for long. There wasn't time for rejoicing, or certification. In order to save the house (and she *did* want to save it, though things were going too fast at the moment to know why), the flames had to be put out. Pronto.

Graceful as a ballerina, she dropped from the joist and began stomping Bolt's body. But some of the fire had already spread. Licks of it burned near struts and dry gable studs. A yellowed pile of newspapers stood in one corner. In another was an old office desk, flipped upside-down like a dead animal.

She crushed out one fireball just as two more came alive behind her. These she managed to get, but her boot kicked a piece of tinder into the newspapers, which immediately burst alight.

"Fuck!"

Desperate now, Keltie ran to extinguish this new blaze. Instead, she tripped and fell screaming to the floor. A hand appeared to help her up. She knew whose it was before even looking.

"Marty!"

"Here I am again," he said. "Need a lift?"

"Nah. Go grab a beer."

Together they were able to put the flames out, saving Bolt's pyre for last. His bones crunched as they stamped him down. His skull grinned. The fight was over.

They stood over the vampire's skeleton for a long time without saying a word. Smoke rose from ashes of once fine garments.

"What happened?" Marty asked.

Keltie showed him the Bible.

His brow darkened. "That?"

"This," she nodded.

"Thought you said you were an atheist."

"I am, Marty. But there's still wisdom in here. Also, you were right."

"About what?"

"There are still things I believe in. I just needed to remember them."

"|—"

She cut him off. "You were right about something else as well."

"Oh boy. Two in a row? What else did I get lucky with?"

Before answering, Keltie looked up, down, right, left. Then, nodding, she said: "I'm starting to like this house, too."

Twenty-five: For All Intents and Purposes

The rain had stopped, but the wind still shook the trees around Wooster-Boalt.

Keltie and Marty met it full force on the front step. Their hair whipped to and fro. Yet rather than raise an arm to block the assault, Keltie breathed it in, and let it twirl Mrs. Haschak's red ribbon. Marty had no choice in the matter; he was carrying a box in both hands.

Keeping to the shadows, they walked round the side of the house. Here lay a yard of wet grass, the pungent odor of which struck Keltie almost as hard as the wind. Marty put the box down.

"Here," he said, opening his hand to her.

Keltie passed him the shovel she'd been carrying. Then he began to dig. *Schuck!* *Schuck!* Over and over, the shovel struck dirt, kicking up more dampened scents. Marty tossed each load over his shoulder without concern as to where it landed. Once, a nightcrawler dropped into his hair, making Keltie laugh. Not long after that, the hole was ready.

Marty speared the shovel into the ground, grabbed the box, and dumped Bolt's bones into the mucky black. Ten minutes later, they were fully buried.

Using his shovel blade, the Filipino tamped the ground, nodded, looked at Keltie. Sweat gleamed on his face. His hands shook. He would not sleep tonight, she knew. Goodness no. He would lie awake in whatever bed the school could provide for him (or perhaps *her* bed, if they were lucky) and look at the ceiling as this stormy wind whistled in the eaves. He'd almost been killed today. Burned alive in his own room. He'd come through the ordeal, just as Keltie had come through hers, but time was nothing if not a slow healer. All the two of them could rely on, the only raft they could cling to, was the fact that it was *over*. Over at last.

Suddenly the dirt at Keltie's feet rustled. She looked down just in time to see a boney hand burst forth and seize her ankle.

Then Bolt's entire skeleton exploded from the ground, spewing soil. Before she could scream, his hand snatched her throat. She stared at his skull in disbelief. Two vacant eye sockets stared back, and though the windows of his soul were dark, Keltie sensed the life behind them, the awareness. It was pure hatred.

Her boots left the ground. She watched Bolt's jawbone fall open as if in effort to speak, and envied the air it drew. Despite the high wind, her own lungs could get nothing of the sort. She tried punching the skeleton and only wound up hurting her knuckles. She tried to kick its pelvis but missed well wide.

There came a *swoosh!* as something cut the air, followed by the sound of metal on bone. Keltie was dropped to the ground, but not before she saw the skeleton's head fly off and hit the side of the house like a wet baseball. It rolled towards her for a distance, coming to a stop with its bloodless eyes cast upon her in one final glare of evil.

"Hey," Marty said, holding the shovel that had done the deed. "You okay?"

Keltie stood on wobbly legs. She rubbed her neck, coughed, swallowed hard. "Peachy," she at last managed to get out. Then, gesturing the bones: "Put those fucking things in different graves if you still want to bury them. How's that sound?"

Tossing the shovel aside, he rushed to bear her up.

And there they stood together, beneath the huge, dark windows of Wooster-Boalt, for a long, long time. Later, as they regathered the bones, a light rain began to fall once more. At the north end of the house lay a small flower bed. Here, they buried half of Bolt's remains,

leaving the other half for the hole Marty'd already dug.

When it was over, he looked at her. Soaking wet and covered with mud (as was she), he looked at her.

"Vera would be happy," he said, "if she were here."

"I think so, too," Keltie nodded.

"She's avenged. Finally avenged. Thank you."

"We saw something wrong and we put it right. Both of us."

"Yeah."

She smiled. "Ready to go home?"

He smiled back. Until that moment, Keltie felt uncertain if he was really okay.

Reassurance lifted her now. For the first time since leaving the house, Marty looked like the boy he was: unburdened, set free.

"I'm ready," he replied. "You?"

"Almost. I...actually forgot to do something."

He looked curious, but rather than explain herself, Keltie led him 'round back of the house, here to lock the door Bolt had left open. The idea struck her only moments ago. Marty had been set free, and so, in its way, had Wooster-Boalt. But for all of its might, as well as its long history, it was now defenseless. A brooding monolith without an owner to care for it. Securing it against thieves seemed to Keltie the least she could do.

She locked the front door, then, smiling up at Marty, said: "Let's cruise."

Five minutes later, it was as if no one at all had come to Wooster-Boalt that night. And here is where this story, for all intents and purposes, comes to an end.

Twenty-six: Summer Things

Almost.

It took time, of course, for Keltie's world to resort to normalcy again. Or rather, what passed for normalcy. As luck would have it, a number of pedestrian events arose to help things along the way. One of them was exam week. Since Bolt's fire damage to the school was limited mainly to the roof, all class scheduling remained intact. This turned out to be good as far as Keltie's scores were concerned. Having short-circuited her fears and doubts on Bolt, the exams suddenly seemed like small beer. She sat through her tests on autopilot, marking down answers like a girl high on antihistamine. Anna Sewell died in 1878 after finishing *Black Beauty*. Einstein's theory of general relativity is a theory of gravitation. The Ming Dynasty was the ruling dynasty of China for 276 years.

Final grades for the year arrived at the end of June. Just before lunch a girl walked the halls, delivering cards to each door. Keltie took hers without a word, tossed it on the bed, and went to eat Brussels sprouts in the cafeteria. When she came back the card was still on the bed. It had nothing as yet to say. There was no way it could speak with its face on the pillow.

Begrudgingly, she decided to have a look. She'd gone through the trouble of attending classes, after all. May as well find out how things went.

Science: B+

English: A

Gym: A+

Math: C+

History: B

Well then. She'd passed. Bully for that. Next year she'd be a junior.

Her mom provided another convenient, if not altogether comfortable, distraction from recent insanity. With school out, Keltie was able to keep a much closer eye on Sunset Lane. Twice a week, she visited Chloe's trailer, sometimes with Cameron, sometimes alone. Each was an exercise in avoidance for both women. They drank tea; they watched television. They went shopping for clothes, where Keltie's preference for short skirts triggered a far less hostile reaction in Chloe than it had Cameron. At the end of the day they would either dine out or cook dinner together. Chloe's kitchen was small but functional. And best of all, she'd been keeping it clean of late. Each week Keltie would approach the trailer with cautious eyes, bracing herself for the worst. But if Chloe was having trouble with sobriety (and how could she not, after so many years of drinking?), she never let on.

Cameron continued to do his janitor bit at the Methodist church. He seemed happy with his position, or at the very least content. There were no bitter, back-handed comments about work when they went out to dinner. No sneers or rolling of the eyes when she asked what life at the church was like. His chatter was pleasant, his jokes light and inoffensive. Only once did he bring up the recent past, commenting in an off way about the red ribbon in her hair. It looked pretty, he said, dabbing his mouth with a napkin at Berry's. Keltie thanked him and mentioned it was a gift from Mrs. Haschak. Then she tactfully changed the subject.

Her final distraction, and by far the sweetest, was Marty.

He spent that summer close to her side, eating lunch with her in the cafeteria, taking her for sunset walks on the back lawn. On the night of July 4th they went to the fairgrounds, where

she sat in his lap to watch the town fireworks display. At the end of July they spent a day at Cedar Point, riding roller coasters and eating cotton candy. That night, as they strolled an off-midway path aglow with Chinese lanterns, he kissed her and said he loved her.

A month later, his family moved out of state.

To Texas, where his dad had taken a new job. Keltie cried, though it didn't help. For nights leading up to his departure, she cried. This on the school doorstep as well, while a car waited to take him away, hugging him tight as she could. It was a hot August afternoon, the air barely breathable. Yet even the freshest breeze could not give her solace then.

"Take this," she sobbed, pulling the red ribbon from her hair.

"I love you," Marty said again. "We'll keep in touch online. And I'll come back. I swear it."

Then he got into the car. And when the car drove off, she was alone.

She stood on the step for a long time, watching Benedict Avenue shimmer in the heat. Turning to go inside, she noticed an open window that let on the art room. It was the same one she and Penelope had used for escape not eighteen months back.

Great, the crazy bitch said, *perfect*.

Seeing it made her cry all over again.

Another thing that hurt was the sale of Wooster-Boalt. It happened in September, not long after classes started. Keltie went to the library to check out a book on trigonometry (Jesus), and came to a dead halt before the newspaper rack. The front page picture for the local rag made her blood go cold. PRIVATE INVESTOR BUYS WOOSTER-BOALT, its headline read, beneath a grainy image of the vampire's former residence.

The accompanying article mentioned no names. Regardless, Keltie read it three times. The news saddened her, though she didn't know why. Other than to understand that she liked the house. Marty liked it, too. Together, perhaps, they could have grown to love it. But not now. Now, all three stood in separate worlds.

"Take care of it," she said aloud to the newspaper. "Whoever you are. Take care of it."

A boy at a nearby table shushed her violently.

"Oh fuck you," she told him.

"Detention," the librarian, who'd overheard, said.

"Shit."

"Double detention."

Keltie rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on!"

"Triple."

"Goddammit!"

"Quadruple."

"Fine," Keltie said, "I'm just gonna leave."

"No you're not," the librarian smiled back. "Your first detention is now. Grab a feather duster. The shelves are a mess."

Epilogue: Goodnight

October came. It did not bring with it a happy Halloween. Keltie flunked two of her end of semester exams—trigonometry and world history. Also, her room in the south wing received a new bunkmate: Sadie. Green-haired, pierced, and tattooed, she smiled at Keltie one afternoon, from a new bed by the window, while outside a dreary drizzle glazed the streets.

“We’re roommates!” she beamed, as if this were a once in a lifetime occurrence.

Keltie sincerely hoped so. She welcomed Sadie best as she could, told her to make herself at home. Then she proceeded to go about the business of ignoring her with a handset and ear buds.

Also during that month came a new rule, implemented by the school librarian, that the library’s computer shall be used for study purposes only. Any student caught playing games or engaged in other activities deemed leisurely would be banned for three weeks. This put a serious crimp in Keltie’s time with Marty. Access to the internet now involved going to the public library, or using one of the computers at the Methodist church (where Cameron regularly allowed her to pop in).

But she and Marty *did* find time. She had his Skype ID and called it whenever the chance arose. His updates from Texas were fun if also a great deal wanting in a physical aspect. He claimed to love his new climate. Filipino that he was, the dry heat suited him. He also asked, repeatedly, when Keltie could come down for a visit. The weather was nice, but he needed her. Oh so badly, he needed her. Broken-hearted all over again, Keltie promised to find a way. Then she took a few discreet and rather daring pictures to tide him over.

“I’m going to check 4chan every night,” she warned, “and if I find myself there, you’re dead.”

“Deal,” Marty said.

From one of these sessions, near Halloween, she decided to walk back to school via Wooster-Boalt. It was still raining, and rather cool for the time of year, but she had an umbrella, and the crisp air felt good to breathe. Saying a final goodbye to Cameron, she struck off down West Main.

Wet leaves covered the sidewalks, making them treacherous. Decorations grinned from wooden porches. Before long the two of these—foliage and frivolity—conspired to distract her from the street.

Which was why she didn’t see the black van.

It roared to the curb like a jungle predator. At first Keltie spared it only mild interest. This was Norwalk, after all, and no one in Norwalk really knew how to drive well. But when two large men, also in black, jumped out and told her to stop right where she was, Keltie dropped her umbrella and ran.

She didn’t get far. She was in boots, and the leaves were slippery. Also, the men were much larger, much stronger. She never had a chance. One of them grabbed her, cupped his hand over her mouth. The other held the van’s sliding door open so she could be pitched inside. She landed on her butt and rolled, getting her feet tangled in the wheels of an office chair.

“*What’s going on?*” she screamed.

But already the sliding door had closed. A lock clicked. Keltie grabbed the handle, pulled. Nope. The door wouldn’t budge. She was trapped.

“Hush yourself,” one of the men said as he took the passenger seat.

What choice did she have? Hands shaking, Keltie took hold the office chair and climbed aboard. The van was rolling now. Purring along in the rain. Windshield wipers swished. Keltie tried to get a sense of who'd kidnapped her through observation of the surroundings. They were well financed. The van's interior looked slick and clean. A desk was mounted on the wall. A computer, a keyboard.

They came to a stop at North Pleasant. To the right stood Wooster-Boalt, huge and dark as ever. The stoplight clicked to green. Much to Keltie's surprise, the man driving turned right, drove a short distance on North Pleasant, then pulled into the driveway of Wooster-Boalt.

"Hey," Keltie said. "Why are you taking me here?"

No one answered. The van stopped. Seconds later she found herself forced through the very same back door Bolt had forced her through months ago. A casket no longer greeted her, however. Indeed, the mourning room had been stripped utterly bare. This too in the hallway. None of Bolt's old furniture remained. Everything looked empty, clean, polished. Hardwood floors echoed their footsteps beneath bare-bulbed ceiling lights.

The living room offered two minor differences. One was a tea table. The other, a frosty-haired old man dressed in a brown suit and pleasant smile. Upon notice of his new guest, the man stood up, extended his hand, and nodded.

"How do you do?" he asked in a rich, musical voice. "My name is Vincent Peters. And you, my darling, simply have to be Miss Keltie Burke." His head tilted. "Tell me please that I'm correct?"

"You are correct," Keltie said. "You are also guilty of assault and kidnapping."

Vincent Peters chuckled. "Oh, my dear! I do apologize for the method I employed bringing you here. But how else could one convince you—*you*, Miss Burk, the vampire killer—to return to this house? It is, after all, a place of great if recent unpleasantness. Gentlemen?" His eyes leaped to the giants at Keltie's side. "I believe we'll be fine for now. Please retire to the mourning room until you're called."

"I'm not sure what you mean by vampire killer," Keltie said once the men were gone. "It was more luck than skill. And how on earth did you even know—"

"Nonsense!" Peters huffed. "Luck alone does not defeat a creature old as Bolt."

"Mr. Peters—"

But he cut her off again. "Please," he said, gesturing the table, "sit down. Let's have tea."

After some hesitancy and distrustful rigmarole, Keltie took a seat. The room's lighting was weak, with but a fireplace and two low-watt bulbs providing the glow, yet Keltie still managed to get a better look at this Vincent Peters from her side of the table. He wore a tweed jacket with white shirt. A maroon ascot, beneath which dangled a heavy silver chain. And it was near impossible to not almost gawk at his frosted white hair, shining brighter than anything Wooser-Boalt had on current offer.

"You look familiar," she said.

Smiling, Peters poured her tea. "I hear that every so often. From those who appreciate the past. And observant young ladies like yourself. Sugar?"

"Two, please."

Plop! Plop!

"Ah!" Peters said. "Such a satisfying sound! One can never drink too much tea."

"You don't want to say that to people like Reverend Jennings."

Peters blinked at her for a moment, tea-pot in hand. His face registered total surprise. "And an avid reader as well," he fairly gushed with appreciation. "Oh Miss Burke! I can clearly see I have chosen the right girl! Oh yes indeed!"

"Right girl for what exactly?"

"Ah!" Peters said again. He poured another tea for himself, sat down, sipped.

Shrugging, Keltie took a sip of her own. Then she waited. It didn't kill her—at least not straight away. No odd abdominal pains came about, nor sudden urges to vomit.

Relax, girl, it's tea; he's drinking it, too.

"I'll be brief," the strange man continued. "Since goodness knows you've had enough mysticism in your world for the entire year."

"More like a hundred years."

Peters' head gave a theatrical little nod. "Perhaps, perhaps. But there's more, Miss Burke. Ever so much more. And I feel that you, my dear, are just the person we want as a"—he hesitated, hands waving for the right word—"restorer of banality and normalcy. For want of a more proper way of describing things."

"Yes," Keltie said, "you may want to find something more proper. Because I'm lost."

"Miss Burke," Peters replied, "I am head of an organization known as S.L.A.B. SLayers of Altered Beasts. And I would like to bring you on board as one of our hunters. How does that sound so far?"

She'd been about to take another drink of tea. Now the cup wavered. Peters couldn't be serious. Yet his eyes, walnut brown, shined with enthusiasm for an answer. Keltie had none to give. She was utterly gob smacked by his offer.

"Do you need time?" Peters asked.

She drank her tea. "I don't know what I need at this moment."

"Take a look at these..."

Peters bent and unzipped a bag she'd not previously noticed. From it came two large pictures—about nine inches in length and six across—which the old man then placed before her. Both were black and white. One was of a man, tall, dark. He wore a flannel shirt and jeans. An ax rested in one hand. The other photo showed a large, ferocious dog with glowing eyes. Keltie recoiled.

"What the hell?" she said. "It's a dog."

"No madam," Peters corrected. "It's a wolf."

She looked at the pictures again. "What's it doing? Eating up this lumberjack's sheep?"

"No madam," Peters said again, his voice grave. "It's eating up this lumberjack's soul."

"I don't understand."

"Yes you do. You're just being stubborn."

Keltie continued to stare at the pictures. Man and wolf. Wolf and man. Man, wolf. Man, wolf. Wolf...

"Stop it," she admonished. "A wolfman?"

"A werewolf, Miss Burke," the other said. "A silly word, I know. Silly to nonbelievers who like going to double-features on Saturday afternoons. But very, very serious to S.L.A.B." He tapped the photos with one well-manicured finger. "This one in particular has been taking victims in and around the village of Martin's Ferry, Ohio. Are you familiar with it?"

"With Martin's Ferry? I've heard of it."

"You'll hear of it a great deal more, should you decide to join our team." He put the pictures back into the bag, zipped it shut. "While you think it over, Miss Burke, have this..."

"Now what are you giving me?"

His answer came in the form of old silver key, slid across the table to *ting!* against her teacup. Then Vincent Peters rose to his feet, slinging the bag on his shoulder.

Keltie picked up the key. "What is this for?" she asked.

Peters gave her bow. Again, theatrically. For a moment Keltie had to wonder just where this man's roots lay: Hollywood or New York City?

"That," he said, "is for the front door of Wooster-Boalt. There's one for the back door as well. Check the library. The house is yours, Miss Burke."

At this her jaw fell wide open. "*What?*"

"If," Peters went on, "you decide to join us, of course. Your first assignment would be Martin's Ferry. Ah! One last thing!" His hand dove into the tweed jacket and returned with a slip of paper. From her chair Keltie could see a phone number written on it. "Call us," he said, placing the number on the table, "as soon as you've made your decision."

"Uh..."

"And in the meantime, enjoy the house. It really is a beautiful old place. Such history." His eye went to the far wall for a moment. "Pity about the chalkboard, though. Was the vampire visibly upset?"

Keltie grabbed the teapot, refilled her cup. Would that the drink inside only be stronger. "Furious," she told him.

"Of course he was. But then he too is a part of fallen history now." His smile, which had disappeared upon lamentation of the blackboard, returned. "Right, Miss Burke?"

"Right you are," she said, and slurped her tea.

"Shall I go?"

"Please," Keltie nodded. "I gotta decorate this place. Then go kill a werewolf."

The smile on Peters' face became a warm, happy glow, rivaling the hearth. "Splendid, Miss Burke. Splendid. I know you'll do well."

"Thank you, Mr. Peters. Goodnight."

The frosty-haired man left with his two assistants in tow. For a long time after, Keltie remained in the living room, staring at the fire, the phone number, the broken blackboard. Sitting and staring, all by herself in one of Norwalk's oldest, largest, spookiest mansions.

"Boo!" she cried out at last, grinning.

Then she poured another cup of tea, raised it in toast of roads with many turns, and drank.

February, 2016-December, 2016

AFTERWORD

I have just come from one of the classrooms in the old junior high school where we're shooting our next book, *Desdemona*. Tag was with me, as were a number of his ex classmates from those days of his in which yours truly didn't exist. Someone had given him a mock schedule to follow for a mock school day. We all thought that was funny. Except, well, whoever wrote it must have been a boy, because the handwriting was so poor Tag could only read about half. Then he gave up and handed it to me. I couldn't read it either. What I *could* read, however, looked very strange. The name of one of the classes—honest to goodness—was *Beautiful*. Now what exactly would be taught in a class like that? Who would be the teacher?

Tag wondered too, but rather than employ reason and rationalization to the problem, he made fun of it. He imagined the teacher as being a flamboyant homosexual, strutting in front of a blackboard while giving tips about clothes and make-up and decorating your table for guests. Did we laugh? Oh hell yes we did. Tag can call up a gay lisp that is lispier than any gay's I have ever known.

My point is this: Even in the worst of times (and things are bad right now, trust me) that guy can make just about anyone laugh. He rarely feels like laughing himself, but he also knows the importance of humor as a way to forget and, ultimately, as a way to heal.

I had high hopes for *Splattered* when it came out last year. Why not? It was funny, it was fun. My character, Keltie Burke, was sexy and cool. The dialogue was ripping. We had a marvelous supporting cast. Whenever I got the chance I would say to Tag: "Hey, everyone's going to read this book; everyone's going to talk about it."

He never believed me. Turned out he was right. Hardly anyone so much as blinked at *Splattered*. Still, we were *all* surprised at how poorly it did, to the point where Tag asked me to write this afterword instead of doing it himself. So here I am.

Sorry you guys didn't go for this one more. Somebody needs to tell me why. I really do believe it's a great novel. We certainly had fun making it. Well, maybe not *too* much fun. We take comedy very seriously. Does that make sense? It ought to. Nothing gets green-lit until we're absolutely certain people are going to laugh. If nobody laughs, it's the ax right there. Kaput.

You know what's hard? Being in love with a man who doesn't believe in himself. I'm in that boat right now. But as the leading lady in not only Tag's books but his life as well, I consider cheerleading as part of my job. He needs my support just to make it through an ordinary day. On the set of a novel (like the one we're trying to work on now), it's the very air he breathes. You read that right. I do breath-holding scenes in a lot of our stories; he's the one who'd suffocate without me.

Not that I'm stupid enough to think I wouldn't die without him. I absolutely would. We need each other. We really do. And I keep telling him: "One day, baby, we're going to break through."

It just didn't happen with *Splattered*. Maybe it won't with *Desdemona*, either. I don't know. But I'll keep cheering. Someone who loves me, who created me, can't go on without it.

That's all the motivation I require.

Crystal Genesio, January 30, 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ooo Baby Baby—copyright 1965, by Smokey Robinson and Pete Moore; Motown

Ice Ice Baby—copyright 1989, by Vanilla Ice and DJ Earthquake; SBK Records

Drive My Car—copyright 1965, by Paul McCartney and John Lennon; Parlophone, EMI

Excerpt from “Drink My Blood”—short story by Richard Matheson

Lando Calrissian, from The Empire Strikes Back—copyright 1980, by George Lucas



Tag Cavello was born in Norwalk, Ohio, in 1971. Today he lives with his wife and two young daughters in Manila, Philippines.

Other Books By Tag Cavello

Double Dutch and Other Stories

Regions of Passion

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