



BITING IN PLAIN SIGHT

MaryJanice Davidson

For my son.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

There is a town called Embarrass, Minnesota, but it's not as close to Babbitt Lake as I made it seem. However, vampires love the water and have been known to buy houseboats and even cruise ships.



Prologue

THE town knew Sophie Tourneau was a creature of the night, but they were careful not to ask too many questions. Even the town gossips, who would rather speculate than eat, were careful to restrain themselves.

Embarrass, Minnesota, knew several things and, most important, knew there were some things best left unsaid. The town knew, for example, that Sophie Tourneau (called "Dr. Sophie" by everyone since time out of mind) had come to live among them sometime in the middle of the last century. Some of the old-timers were sure she had come in the spring of 1965; others swore up and down that she hadn't shown her pretty face until 1967.

They knew she lived in a houseboat down on Babbitt Lake, puttering to various islands on her days off, and her houseboat, *The Hymenoptera*, whatever the heck that meant, was often tied up on one of Babbitt's many sand beaches. They knew she carried a cell phone and would instantly return to land to tend to her work if called.

They knew she was short, about five feet, two inches tall, and sweetly rounded in all the right places. They knew her hair was as black as blacktop and as straight as the path to hell, and that her eyes were a soft, velvety brown. They knew she was pale, and never had a tan, or even a sunburn, not even on the hottest nights. She didn't get sweaty on the hottest nights, either.

And they knew, argue about her year of coming until they were blue, that she had been among them for at least four decades, and had not aged a day in all that time. Dr. Sophie still looked twenty-five years old. Children who had been in kindergarten the year she came were now grown, with children, and in some cases grandchildren, of their own. They were covering their gray or letting it all hang out, while Dr. Sophie still got carded if she tried to buy wine in the Cities.

Oh, and the town knew one more thing... she was extraordinary with animals. In a fanning community like Embarrass, that counted for a lot.



There wasn't a dog with hay fever, a cow with mastitis, a cat with distemper, a horse with twins, that Dr. Sophie couldn't manage, couldn't gentle down and help.

Of course, she couldn't help *all* of them. But she helped a damn goodly number of them. They never bit her, never fought. The town knew if you took your kid's puppy to Dr. Sophie, you were likely to be able to put off the old "Scooter went to live on a farm with lots of other dogs" speech, often for years.

There were, of course, theories. Most of them were advanced by each generation's crop of little boys. There were the usual dares, but they fell flat when Dr. Sophie caught them sneaking up to her houseboat (she always caught them; the woman had eyes in the back of her head and the ears of a bobcat) and invited them aboard for cookies. The children always came back, and with stories no more fantastic than, "She served us chocolate chip."

But children did not disappear. Dr. Sophie was never spotted baying at the moon in the nude. She would come out at any time of the night, any night, to tend to an ailing animal, be it wild fox or prize bull. There were no cryptic messages left in blood, anywhere. If she didn't keep daylight hours, well, that's what they had Dr. Hayward for. If she didn't go to church, well, who could blame her? In Embarrass you had your choice: you could be a Presbyterian or a lapsed Presbyterian. Plenty of people—well, some people—didn't go to church. And if she wasn't a regular goer, she always contributed to the fund-raisers or made baked goods when the occasion called for it.

Of course, there was something wrong about Dr. Sophie. No question. A beautiful, exotic woman who, even after all this time retained a slight French accent, a beautiful woman who did not age, who picked some tinpot little town to live in... or hide in. That was wrong. *She* was wrong. But nobody asked questions. Nobody showed up with pitchforks. She was the best veterinarian in the tri-state area; maybe even the country. Wrong or not, vampire or witch or gypsy queen or whatever she was, nobody wanted her to leave.

One person in particular.



"DR. Sophie?" An urgent rap on the screen door of her houseboat. She recognized the voice. Thomas "Don't-call-me-Tommy" Carlson, the mechanic's son. "Dr. Sophie, can I come in?"

"Come on in, Thomas." She was checking her bag, having a good idea what the problem was. "Is Misty having trouble?"

In the manner of eight-year-old boys, Thomas slammed the screen door aside and jumped into the boat before it could rebound closed. The sound was not unlike rocks rolling across a parking lot. "She can't get started, doc. She tries and tries, and she's licking herself, like, all the time down there, yuck! But the kittens won't come."

"We'd better go give her a hand, then," Sophie replied. "Lead the way."

She followed the boy silently; the mechanic's family lived on an old farm just down the road; it was a brisk ten-minute walk. She wondered idly why he hadn't called her cell phone and saved himself a trip, then she remembered the indefatigable energy of children. She hadn't realized how lost in thought she was until the child spoke again. "You're missing Ed, are'ncha?"

"I—yes."

"Well, he was old," Thomas said in a tone that was both heartless and comforting.

"You," Sophie said, smiling. "You think you'll be eight forever."

The truth was, she missed Ed dreadfully. She had known him since she was a child in Paris, and after she had been turned, he had come with her to America. She had bought him, a former banker trapped in the city his entire life, the home of his dreams; an enormous farm and all the livestock he could play with. In return, he had let her feed whenever she wished. Theirs was a comfortable relationship, one based on mutual need and friendship. She supposed he had been her sheep, but she despised that vampiric term. It denoted a relationship that was not equal, when, in fact, Ed called the shots. If anything, she had been *his* sheep.

But she had been foolish to overlook the inevitable... that he would age and, someday, die. She had assumed her friend would be eternal, like her.

And now, she missed him dreadfully.



At the end, though she had begged, he had refused to let her turn him. "Yeah," he'd croaked derisively, "this country needs an eighty-six-year-old vampire like I need another plate in my head. You think I want arthritis in my knees for all eternity? Don't you touch me, young lady. You're not too big to spank." His raspy voice had softened as he looked into her dark eyes, took in her unlined face. He went on in French, their mother tongue. "You would not be doing it for me, anyway, yes? You're just afraid to be alone. As old as you are, it's time to learn. So don't touch me. Let me go, Sophie."

So she had acceded to his wish, and oh how bitter it was to watch him die, to see him buried in the cold earth. Worse than the steadily rising hunger was an even more basic need: she missed her friend.

Thomas, she noticed, was looking at her sideways. "Some of the guys were wondering."

"Some of the guys are always wondering."

"Yeah, but. Now that Ed's dead. You know, we... they... were wondering if you were staying."

"This is my home now," she replied quietly. "It's been my home for... for a long time."

"Yeah, that's what we think, too," the child replied comfortably. "My dad says he was a kid when... I mean, we're glad you're staying."

She glanced at the back of Thomas's neck, tan and healthy and as wide as two pork loins placed side by side. Then she jerked her gaze elsewhere. That was no way to be thinking. She would not throw away everything she had made... The town was curious, but a third-grader was out in the dark with her, and no one would question it, question him. Ed would be furious if she put that in jeopardy, and he would be right.

But she was a realist, and Ed's death had presented special problems.

She sighed. She was old enough so it wasn't a matter of urgency... yet. Meanwhile, there was Thomas's cat. The work, the animals, the country, the people, those were always there, and worth staying for.



LIAM Thompson looked out his window and saw Sophie and the mechanic's kid hurry by on the dirt road just outside his farm. Kid's preggo cat must be having a hard time. Or the dog ate something out of the trash again.

Well, all right. That meant she'd probably go back to the office after she fixed whatever pet was sick. Sophie kept late hours, to put it mildly.

Liam looked around, but all the house cats were annoyingly healthy. So was his dog, Gladiator. The blue-eyed pup looked up at him as Liam prowled the house searching for sickness, his long tail making muted thumps on the hardwood floor.

"Well, shit," Liam said in his deep radio announcer's voice (not that he talked on the radio, but everyone in town told him he could). He went outside and checked the barn. No, all the barn cats looked perky, too, dammit. Cripes, how hard was it to get a sick cat when a guy needed one?

What was that?! One of the barn cats sneezed. Excellent! Could be a cold. Or pneumonia. Or cat flu. Or rabies.

He scooped up the startled animal and hurried out of the barn.

WHEN Sophie returned to her office, she wasn't surprised to see Liam Thompson waiting for her with what appeared to be a perfectly healthy cat. The cat's ears were back and she looked resigned, as did all Liam's pets when dragged to her examining room.

"What is it, Liam?" she asked, smiling. "Distemper? Swine flu? Mad cat disease?"

"She's been sneezing and sneezing," Liam told her. He was a fine-looking man, about six feet tall, with prematurely gray hair cut to Army regulation shortness and eyes the exact color of the faded blue jeans he wore. He appeared to have laugh lines, except no one in town could recall hearing him laugh, and his mouth was firm, his nose long and straight. His tan work shirt was rolled to the elbows, and, as always, he gave off the delightful scent of cotton and soap. She vastly enjoyed his company, even though he wasn't much of a talker. That was all right. Neither was she.

"Well, bring her in," Sophie said. "Let's take a look." It would be, she knew, a rather large waste of her time. Liam's pets were hardly ever sick; she suspected he was a hypochondriac on their behalf. Still, it warmed her to see a man so concerned about animals. The few times one of his cats



had been genuinely ill, she had caught it in plenty of time. The only thing Liam Thompson's cats ever died of was old age.

"So..." Liam said.

"Yes," Sophie replied. She quickly examined the cat, a pretty little mouse-colored shorthair, *felis domestica*, and found her to be in sound health, if...

"Well, you're going to have kittens again."

"Great," he said. "I guess you'll be around when her time comes, then."

"I guess I will." Liam always insisted she attend when his cats birthed. It wasn't necessary, because one of the many things a cat could do well was have kittens, but he seemed to appreciate her presence. He always paid his bills promptly, too. He even paid them in person; he did not trust the mail.

"You know the drill," she said. "I guess I will see you in about thirty days."

"Yeah," he replied, and scooped up the cat, and left.

"Good night," she called after him, and he waved a blocky hand back in reply.

HE had to lean against the door of his truck for a minute before putting the cat inside and climbing in. God! God! God! She got prettier every time he saw her. Well, that wasn't true; she looked exactly the same every time he saw her. Which was utterly, totally, completely beautiful.

Those velvety brown eyes! Those soft, red lips! Even the way she talked charmed the shit out of him. "You know zee drill." And the way she said his name: "LEE-um." Well, okay, everybody pronounced it like that, but Sophie gave it a special accented spin. He had been waiting twenty years—since he had become a legal adult—to declare his intentions, but he was as tongue-tied around her at thirty-eight as he had been when he was fifteen.

The thirty days stretched ahead of him like an endless tunnel.

He started the pickup and smiled down at the cat, which was busily grooming herself. "Good work," he told her. "Thanks for getting knocked up."

The cat, naturally, ignored him.



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THIRTY DAYS LATER...

"THAT makes four," Sophie said. "And now I think she's done." Smiling, she looked down at the blind, squealing creatures. They were various shades of white, gray, and brown, all pink noses and gaping maws and wee claws, clambering all over each other in search of food. "And your cat... er... ?"

"Fred."

Sophie didn't miss a beat. Liam gave all his cats odd, thought-up-at-the-last-second names. "Fred seems fine. Call me, of course, if she seems to have any trouble."

"Yeah." Liam took a deep breath. "Would you... d'you want to come into the house? For something to drink?"

Sophie nearly winced. Although the blood and various mess of Fred's birthing hadn't tempted her, the way the pulse was beating quickly at Liam's throat—almost as if he were nervous—*did*. She had to, *had* to find a solution to this problem. Driving down to the Cities and preying on various muggers and panhandlers simply would not do. For one thing, her car couldn't take the extra mileage. She knew she should have bought a Ford.

"I guess you don't," Liam said, incorrectly reading her long silence.

"Oh. Oh! No, I would like to have a drink. Very much." Very, very, very, very, very much. "Please, lead the way."

She followed him inside the neatly kept farmhouse and stood admiring the large kitchen, done in blue and white, and smelling like bread. It reminded her of some of the country houses back home. Liam wasn't a farmer, though he lived on a farm. He had inherited the place, along with quite a bit of money, from his father, who had invented pocket calendars.

"Lemme see," Liam said, bending into the open refrigerator. "I've got milk... two percent, whole, and skim. Diet Coke. Regular Pepsi. Lemonade. Cherry Kool-Aid. Ginger ale. Orange juice. Grape juice. Oh,



and I can make chocolate milk," he added, straightening and showing her the bottle of Hershey's syrup. "If you want."

Her eyebrows arched in surprise... she'd expected water, or maybe a beer. He saw her expression and said, "I know you like to drink."

He had no idea, the silly man. But she had to smile. She supposed if a person only accepted drinks, and never food, over a period of four decades, a reputation was built. "I would love some orange juice," she said. "Low pulp, yes?"

"Yeah."

While he busied himself getting glasses, she wandered around the kitchen, finally thumbing the on button for the small television in the corner. She supposed it was rude, but the heavy silence in the kitchen was beginning to make her nervous. The local news had just started. That would give them something to talk about, thank goodness. "I wonder if we'll find out when there'll be an end to this vile cold snap," she mused aloud.

"So, um, you going to the meeting next week?"

"No," she replied, scratching his husky, Gladiator, between the ears. Gladiator was a less-than-admirable guard dog, getting up briefly to smell her skirt when she entered, then flopping down on the rug with a groan and going back to sleep. "I must work." In truth, the meeting was being held at the church. So, naturally, she couldn't attend. Too bad. She had plenty to say on the issue of tearing down the schoolhouse that had been on the edge of town for over a hundred years. So there were some rats? The thing was a historical monument! Americans. They only wanted what was new.

"Oh. That's too bad. Because I thought that we... um... I... you know, the meeting... if you needed a ride or whatever... Here's your juice."

She took the glass and sipped, and smiled at him. He didn't smile back, merely gulped his own juice thirstily.

He *was* nervous. She couldn't imagine why. She'd known him almost his entire life. He'd grown into a fine man, too. Tall... strong... responsible... if he was teased about being the quietest man in the state, what did she care? He was a good man. He took excellent care of his pets. As she got older, she realized the simple things really were the most important.



"It was kind of you to invite me inside," she said. And it was. Although she had been accepted by the townspeople years ago, she rarely received social invitations of any kind. She was sure that, deep down, the population of Embarrass, Minnesota, knew exactly what she was.

Accepting a vampire on her own terms and allowing her to take care of the pets and livestock was one thing. Inviting a creature of the night into your own home where you lived and slept and were vulnerable all the time was something else.

"I've, uh, been wanting... I mean, it's no big deal. You know, since you came out. To take care of Fred and all. It's, you know, the least I could do." He stared longingly at the bottle of vodka perched on top of the refrigerator. She wanted to suggest he pour himself a stiff shot, but felt that would be inappropriate.

"... the fourth such suicide in five months," the announcer said, and she jerked her head around. "Officials maintain that the deaths were self-inflicted, but the parents of the girls, particularly the latest victim, are not so sure."

Cut to a bereaved father, his eyes rimmed in red, wearing a yellow shirt that was jarringly bright for the circumstances. "Shawna would never have done something like that," he said hoarsely. "She was so happy. She was staring at the U of M next month. Friends... she had friends. She was popular, really popular. And... and she even had a new boyfriend. She never would have killed herself."

Cut back to the news announcer, who had been so heavily BOTOXed it was difficult for her to maintain the expression of vague sympathy. "Regardless, tonight in Babbitt, Minnesota, a town mourns."

Sophie set her empty glass down so hard, it broke on the table. Liam jumped, and Gladiator woke up. "I have to go," she said abruptly. "Thank you for the juice. I must..." She fumbled in her bag for her cell phone, and quickly punched in Dr. Hayward's number.

"What's the matter?" Liam asked, staring at the broken glass. "Are you okay?"

"I'm—yes, Matt? It's Sophie. I'm sorry to bother you this late, but I must leave... yes, right now. Tonight... yes. It's a... family matter... don't laugh, I'm quite serious. Yes... yes, if you please... no, I have no idea. I beg your pardon... yes, I appreciate that, Matt. Good night."



She punched the off button and dropped it in her purse, and turned to go. To her surprise, Liam's hand closed over her arm, just above the elbow. "What's going on?"

Despite her alarm, she was surprised; she couldn't recall him ever touching her. She gestured vaguely toward the television. "It's something I must look into. And... I have to find someone. It's nothing for you to—"

"Is it a vampire thing?"

She nearly fell down. It was one thing to instinctively understand the townspeople knew what she was and tolerated it. And another thing to discuss it obliquely with a child, such as Tommy. But for someone to come right out and ask her... she was so surprised she answered him. "Yes, it's a vampire thing. In fact, I believe a vampire is killing those girls."

"So, you're gonna stop it?"

"Well, I'm going to try. And really, I must go. I—"

"Well..." he said, letting go of her arm and walking over to a kitchen chair and picking up his denim jacket?even though it was August, it was quite chilly in the evenings. "I'll go with you."

"Really, Liam, you—"

"I guess I should be more, you know, specific," he said slowly, in his careful way. "I guess that sounded like a question. Like, can I go with you? But it wasn't. I'm going with you. Besides," he added reasonably, "you're gonna need someone who can look after you during the daytime."

She was so amazed by this turn of events, she let him escort her out to the truck.

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THEY had each agreed to pack a bag and meet back at Liam's farm in half an hour. Sophie raced to her houseboat, packed quickly but carefully; she would, in all probability, be meeting her sovereign the next evening and must be dressed appropriately. Then she called Tommy to make sure he would feed her parakeets and clean the cage while she was gone.



Finally, she hurried back to Liam's place... and skidded to a stop on the gravel driveway, amazed.

He had put a brand-new topper on the back of his red truck and was just now finishing spray-painting the windows black. She stepped around to the back and, careful not to get wet paint on her fingers, pulled the window up. There was a fully inflated air mattress lying the length of the truck bed, piled high with comfortable quilts and pillows.

She heard Liam coming around the side and turned just as he reached her. He jumped a little—most people were surprised at how good her hearing was—and said, "In case we need to move during the day. I can drive and you can sleep."

She chewed on that one for a minute, and finally said, "You seem... well-prepared."

"Well," he said shyly, "I'd always hoped I'd get to drive you around sometime. I just wanted to be ready."

He was so big, and his voice was so soft, it was hard to process the change. Weirdly, he looked more cheerful than she had ever seen him. All because he was driving into the dark unknown... with her? She wrinkled her forehead as she tried to process this, and he laughed. "I'm confused," she admitted.

"Aw, but you sure look cute when you're trying to figure somethin' out." He tossed the now-empty paint can into the garbage, then walked around to the front door. "Let's go, Sophie. You can tell me what's going on during the drive."

"What if I don't tell you anything?" she countered, clambering up into the passenger's seat—dratted thing needed a step ladder! "What if I keep it all a deep dark secret?"

He shrugged and started the truck. "Then we'll have a nice drive."

"Touch鬚 she muttered.

"SO... you know I'm a vampire."

"Yup."

"You've always known."

"Mm—hmm."

"You and everybody else."



He looked over at her, surprised. "Well, I can't vouch for what *everybody* knows and doesn't know. I remember my daddy telling me you were good with animals and we should be nice to you so you didn't leave. That was when I was just a kid m'self." He chuckled. "Boy, you were the prettiest thing I ever saw."

She blushed. Tried to, anyway. Blood didn't rush anywhere in her body anymore. "That's very sweet."

"My point is, nobody ever out and out said, 'Dr. Sophie's a vampire.' But nobody ever got out the cross and pitchforks, either."

"Thank goodness!" She turned, putting her arm across the back of the seat, the better to face his profile. "Weren't you afraid?"

"Heck, no!" He looked surprised. "Just afraid you'd leave. We all knew you didn't... I mean, that you hadn't come from Embarrass. Or even Minnesota. Or even America. We were afraid you'd go back. To where you came from, you know? In... how many years? In all that time, you never once griped about late nights or house calls. Didn't mind working holidays. Truth was, we were scared to let you go."

"That's so... sweet." So they liked her for her work ethic, eh? Well, what did she expect?

"Bunch of outsiders came to build a Catholic church up here," he mused. "Course, Reverend Reed put a stop to that right quick. We didn't know if you could stay, if—"

"So you are telling me, in this entire town, no one, no one at all, had a problem with the resident veterinarian being a vampire?" Too good to be true! There had to be a... what was the colloquialism? A trap? No. A catch.

"Well, sure." He glanced at her, then back at the road. "The ones who had a problem moved away."

"Oh." She sat back, feeling foolish. Of course, several families had moved away in the last forty years. But when no one came down to her houseboat with a teapot full of holy water, she had put it out of her mind. And her dear friend Ed had always kept his ear to the ground. He would have warned her if the town's mood had turned ugly. "Yes, I can see that."

"So, there you go," he said comfortably.

"There I go," she parroted. "Do *you* know where we're going?"

"I expect we're heading down to Tyler Falls."



She blinked. "Yes. That's right. I must know. How did—"

"That news story, the one that got your panties in a bunch. Gal who killed herself was from Tyler Falls."

"They aren't killing themselves," she snapped.

"All right, keep your shirt on. What, you guess another vampire is doing it?"

"Liam, has anyone ever told you, you're extremely astute?"

He shrugged.

"Well, you're right. It's not the girls. What I think is, a vampire is making them fall in love, then he no doubt breaks up with them in some brutal fashion, then enjoys their torment and their eventual deaths. Remember, how the girl's father told the news she had a new boyfriend? I'm willing to bet they *all* had new boyfriends. Bastard," she added in a mutter.

"So, they *are* killing themselves."

"But they wouldn't have, if not for *him*. Bastard," she said again.

"So, we find him. And stop his clock."

"One thing at a time. First we talk to the girls' fathers. I'm suspicious, but I would like to talk to at least one of the family members. Then we tell the queen what we know."

"Okay." Pause. "The queen?"

"Oh, you won't be there," she assured him. "You can just drop me off when we get to Minneapolis."

"Hell with *that*," he said.

"Liam..."

"Nope."

She didn't reply, but figured that could be dealt with when the time came.

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"NO," the woman in the bathrobe said. She was probably in her late forties, but looked like she was on this side of sixty. Poor thing, Liam



thought. Losin' her kid, and now strangers knocking on her door in the middle of the night. "I told you. No more reporters."

She started to swing the door closed, but quick as thought, Sophie brought her arm up and stopped her, her palm slamming into the glass pane so hard, Liam was afraid it would break. "I beg your pardon," she said in her gorgeous accent, "but we do insist. We will not take up much of your time." She smiled big—Liam almost got dizzy, she smiled so big—and looked dead into the woman's eyes. "And a mother knows things, yes? A mother *always* knows things."

As if in a trance, the woman stepped back, leaving the door open. Sophie walked right in, bold as you'd want, and Liam followed her. He noticed that though the woman was staring at Sophie with a rapt expression, she kept her hands up on the neckline of her powder blue robe. Keeping it closed. Hum.

"It's so good of you to see us," Sophie said sweetly, soothingly. "And we won't be a minute. Where is your husband?"

"Asleep. He took three Ambiens and he sleeps all the time."

"Of course. And soon you will be sleeping as well. We just want to hear about Shawna's boyfriend."

"No good," Shawna's mother said, shaking her auburn head, which was probably neat and pretty most times, but tonight it looked like a dirty mop. "He was no good."

"Because he was never around, correct?"

"Yuh."

"You asked and asked to meet him. Told her to invite him to dinner many times."

"He never came."

"That's right, he never ever did, and you never saw him during the day, did you?"

"He was in school," Sophie's mother said, fiddling with the neckline of her robe. Liam had the impression she was trying to break Sophie's gaze, but couldn't quite do it. "He was busy. She understood. But not me. If he really cared for her, he would have met us. He would..." She sighed, a dreadful, lost sound.

Liam's heart was almost breaking, listening to that. To distract himself, he looked around the small ranch house. Pictures of Shawna all over the



place. He jerked his gaze elsewhere, finally settling on Sophie, who was holding the mother's hands with both of her small ones. Her dark eyes were intent and sad at the same time.

He couldn't believe the night's events so far, and felt ashamed that he was so happy in the middle of so much shit and sorrow. He'd finally screwed up his courage... and now they were after a bad guy together. She'd let him come along; shit, she was letting him *drive* her. He was afraid he'd wake up any minute. It was awful being in the dead girl's house, but it would have been more awful to watch Sophie leave.

"Then he quit calling, yes?" Sophie was still pulling information out of the dead girl's mom, as carefully and gently as he'd get a kitten out of the lilac bushes behind his place. "And she couldn't find him? To talk to him, find out what was wrong?"

"It was worse than that. He said she was a child, a little girl. He said he needed a woman. A grown-up woman. He said he hadn't liked her for a while, he was just..." Another dreadful sigh. "Playing."

"And Shawna couldn't take that, yes? She tried to hide it from you, but..."

"A mother always knows. Her dad thought... you know, high school stuff..."

"That she would get over it."

"But she couldn't. He was everything. He was..." Shawna's mother's fingers were fiddling faster. "Her dark sweetheart. Her everything. He was going to be a doctor. He was pre med. That's how they met. And..."

"And she waited until you were gone," Sophie prompted gently.

"And then we came home... and she had... but I think he came back. I think he came back and hurt her by saying more bad things to her. Hurt her until she did that. Hurt her until he got what he wanted."

"As a matter of fact," Sophie said, "so do I. And there's just one more thing... where is this awful creature staying? Did Shawna tell you?"

"He's at the B and B. How many college students do you know who stay at a B and B? He was no good."

"I agree totally. Madam, you will not remember this conversation."

"No," she agreed, "I won't remember it."

"And you'll go to your bed, and find solace with your darling husband. And you'll sleep and sleep."



"I'll sleep and sleep," she agreed, "for the first time since Shawna left."

"Yes. And tomorrow, you will still grieve, but you will start to imagine that perhaps someday, there will be something to live for again. It won't seem like a far-off impossibility."

"Someday there might be something to live for. Lots of kids need good homes." Then she added doubtfully, "But I doubt it. Shawna's death is too big. It takes over everything."

"Yes, but not forever. Go to bed, now, madam." Sophie stood on her toes and kissed the older woman on the cheek. "Shawna sees you."

The woman turned around without another word and shuffled toward the back of the house.

Sophie burst into tears, startling Liam. He put a clumsy arm around her and she leaned against him. She smelled like sweet, fresh straw. "Oh, the poor thing," she wept. "Did you see the pictures? Their only girl, dead. And for what?"

"I guess," he said slowly, "for a mean trick."

Sophie stopped crying at once—though there had been no tears, just a kind of hoarse sobbing—and her eyes took on a hard shine he had never seen before. It was dumb, but he almost felt like taking a step back from her. "That's right, Liam. That's just right. A mean trick. And we're going to stop his clock. We're going to gut him like a trout and take his head and bury it with the garlic bulbs. That's what we're going to do."

"All right," he replied. "Sounds tike a good deal. But I gotta gas up the truck first."

She smiled at that, as he had meant for her to do. "Fair enough. Let's leave this place. Can we be in Minneapolis before dawn?"

"You bet."

She tucked her small hand into his and followed him back to the truck.

6

"I'M sorry," the reservations clerk at the Radisson told them. "The only rooms we have left have a king-sized bed in them. Non-smoking," he added helpfully.



"That will be fine," Sophie replied. Liam was his usual expressionless self, but she assumed he wouldn't mind, either. In fact, the thought of sharing a bed with him caused a pleasant tingle low in her stomach, usually the sort of tingle caused by strolling through a blood bank. If Liam *did* mind, she could always sleep under the bed. Or in the closet. "Do you take American Express?"

When the clerk, a short man with a freckled, egg-shaped, shaved head, turned away to run the card, Liam muttered, "You got a credit card?"

"You know all those 'Cardholder for ten years,' 'Cardholder for twenty years' ads?" she whispered back.

"Don't even tell me."

"Well, I've had one for a long time."

He snickered and, when the clerk came back, said, "Can we get a window facing west?"

The clerk blinked. "Oh, sure."

"Got to take care of my skin," Liam said, totally straight-faced. Sophie almost laughed; Liam looked like a farmer, which was to say he was deeply tanned, with wrinkles around his eyes and hands like leather blocks. He was the SPF association's nightmare.

"Oh, really," Sophie said, rolling her eyes a minute later when they were in the elevator.

"Well, didn't think it was too good to tell him the truth."

"Hotel employees have heard it all. He likely wouldn't have batted an eye."

Liam grunted and glanced down at the key card, which looked almost tiny in his large, capable hand. "We'll draw the drapes, should do the trick, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Or you can sleep with your whole self under the covers."

She almost laughed at the mental image of her deeply unconscious self swaddled in covers deep in the middle of a king-sized hotel bed. "I think closing the curtains will be fine." She followed him out of the elevator and down the hall. "But you don't... ah... I needn't... I don't have to sleep in the bed. With you."

He looked over his shoulder at her, surprised. "Well, where the hell you supposed to sleep? The tub?"



"I was only suggesting—you've been so kind—I do not wish to make you ill at ease."

"The clams we had will do that all by themselves."

She couldn't resist a small scold. "Well, Liam, it was a restaurant that specialized in chicken. What were you thinking?"

"That I like clams," he said cheerfully, opening their door. "Tough to get in northern Minnesota."

"There's a reason," she retorted, sidling past him. It was a standard hotel room, clean but not exceptional. She eyed the king-sized bed a little nervously... it had been a long, *long* time. "Do you wish to have something else? Shall I call room service?"

"Naw, naw. Listen, Sophie..." He sat down on the end of the bed and pulled his boots off, sighing and wiggling his toes in clean white socks. "How come you paid for the room? I mean, why didn't you use your, I dunno, your evil vampire powers and just hypnotize him or whatever?"

"But why? I have money." In fact, quite a bit of it, courtesy of her late great-great-grandfather. Sophie had been lucky enough to sell the vineyard before the blight that took more than half the grapes. But that was a long time ago. She forced herself back to the present, to Liam and the hotel room. "And why get the clerk in trouble? He would have to explain why he let someone stay for free. I don't mind paying."

"Oh. Uh-huh. Well, not that I'm sayin' you should have done it, I was just curious. If I could zap people like you do, I probably wouldn't pay for a damn thing." He paused for a minute, then chuckled. "And I love the way you talk. 'Why get zee clerk in trouble.' Heh. Didja know, when you get nervous, you don't use contractions?"

"Thank you. I did not know that." She cleared her throat, a harsh bark; she never had enough saliva to pull it off. "Ah. I need to go out for a bit. But if you change your mind about room service, please feel free to order whatever you wish. I should return shortly."

"Whoa, whoa." Quick as a flash, he was off the bed and gently grasping her wrist. "Where you off to? What's the matter?"

"I... uh... I need to... well, you've had your meal, and now I must—"

"Oh. Right!" He was silent for a moment, and she started prying his fingers off her arm, careful not to hurt him. She'd been doing this too long to be embarrassed, nor did she want to have a long discussion about it.



She was what she was and there was no use talking about it. "Well, shoot, I'm right here. Why not me?"

She stopped in mid-pry, shocked. "Really? You'd do that? But... why in the world?"

"You're a good girl, Sophie," he said gruffly. "I'm not worried. And I don't think you should be wandering around Minneapolis by your lonesome."

"Liam... I don't want to hurt your feelings, because I'm incredibly flattered. You have no idea what a gift you've offered me—"

"I guess I do," he corrected her. "It's my blood, y'know."

She nodded and continued. "But I just don't think it's appropriate... We live in the same town, but we don't really know each other. And you'll feel... when... *if*... I feed on you, it will be very... sexual. And I would never want to push you... in that way. My friend Ed—"

"—was a lucky man, that's what *I* think." He took her in his arms, carefully, as if she might crack like a china dish. "And the only way you could hurt me is if you sent me away and picked some stranger." Then he kissed her.

She clung to his shoulders and opened her mouth for him, glorying in the feel of his arms around her, his tongue exploring her. He smelled wonderful, like cotton sheets just out of the dryer (with a faint clam underhint). His hands moved restlessly over her back and she pulled his T-shirt up and stroked his hard stomach.

"As for the sex part... shoot, I've wanted you for years. I wanted you before I even knew what wanting really was."

She nearly swooned onto the bed... he was just *darling*! He looked like a hard-working eighteenth-century farmer, and he had the soul of a Renaissance poet. "It's been a long time," she whispered, marveling at the feel of his smooth skin. She had to be almost twice his age, though she didn't look it. Did he mind?

Did she?

"Yeah, I figure... Ed's been gone awhile..."

"Not with Ed. Ed and I were friends, nothing more." She smiled shakily. "We shared blood and friendship and that's all. It's been a *long* time."



"Well, I hear you on that one." He had pulled her cardigan off, unzipped the back of her simple summer dress, then stepped back as her clothes fell to the floor. "Oh, cripes, Sophie. I thought about this a million times, and you're about a zillion times prettier than I could have ever thought up on my own."

She reached behind and unsnapped her bra (even the undead liked support), and her small breasts bounced free. He sucked in a breath and then bent to her, kissing her neck and her cleavage, his tongue darting out to caress a nipple.

"A long time," she repeated, and ripped his shirt over his head so hard she almost threw him to the floor. "Oh! I beg your pardon."

He laughed and tackled her, bringing her to the bed, and they wrestled for a moment, their clothes the casualties.

She crept down the length of his sweetly muscled body, inhaling his musk, stroked his throbbing length for a moment and, when he groaned beneath her busy fingers, carefully sucked him into her mouth.

His hands fisted in her hair, tumbling it loose from the clips, and she pulled him into her throat with no trouble at all, pleasantly surprised to find that sex really *was* like riding a bicycle. But her growing hunger could not be denied much longer—*any* longer—so finally she pulled back, licked his thigh, then sank her fangs into his femoral artery. Salty sweetness flooded her mouth and she nearly rolled to the floor with the goodness of it, the Tightness of it.

He groaned again, his hands still restless in her hair, and she fed, immediately contented. She could feel his penis, hot against her cheek, almost jerking as she took her pleasure from him, as he took pleasure in return.

Once she had enough—it never took much, thank goodness the movies were wrong about *that*, among other things—she could politely return to the festivities, so she sat up and straddled him.

"Oh, Jesus," he said, and she flinched. "Oh, *shit!*"

She laughed.

"Don't worry about it." He reached up and cupped her breasts in his hands. Sophie wriggled with delight as Liam stroked her dark nipples with his thumbs. She positioned herself more carefully and between one moment and the next, he was sliding inside her, filling her as she had



wanted to be filled for too many years. His eyes, that vivid blue she had always admired, slipped closed.

Liam groaned again and shifted his hands to her hips, helping her find a rhythm they both liked. She bent forward and bit him at the neck; she couldn't help it. He shivered and moved against her faster and she met his thrusts with her own urgency. Oh, glory, it was wonderful to be with someone again, to have that connection, to feed, to be *fucked*. Liam was giving her everything she had longed for, all at once. It was almost too much; for a moment she was nearly delirious with happiness. Then she realized she had mistaken her orgasm for delirium.

She pulled away from his neck, almost laughing, and said aloud, "These things happen. Did you...?"

"I'm gonna die now," he announced, answering her question. "That pretty much killed me."

"You look pretty lively to me," she teased. She started to climb off him but he tightened his grip in wordless denial, so she merely shifted and lay beside him.

"Have I mentioned I'm so damned glad you didn't go out tonight?"

"Well, no. I am, too."

"So, okay," he sighed, stroking her shoulders. "I guess this is where we do the pillow-talk, but I'm so friggin' tired..."

"It's been a long night," she told him. "For both of us. Go to sleep."

"You first," he yawned, but she didn't, of course, and finally he quit fighting it and she watched him sleep. For a long time.

7

"DO you think you should check with Jerry?"

"Huh?" He scraped off another inch of shaving cream and met her eyes in the mirror. "How come? Hey, you've got a reflection!"

"Of course I do," she said impatiently. "Did you make arrangements for your pets before we left?"

"Yeah, I dropped the Gladiator off with Tommy... kid's crazy for dogs and his mom said it was okay. Him and Rusher can eat garbage together."



"I hope you're talking about Gladiator and Rusher," she said, smirking. She stretched up and kissed him between the shoulder blades. He shivered, then scraped off more shaving cream.

"You keep that up," he said, "you'll have your hands full."

"Perish the thought." She kissed him again, to tease, then asked, "What about the cats?"

"The cats?"

Odd. He was a smart man, but he seemed to have trouble following the conversation this evening. "Yes, Liam, *your* cats."

"Right. They're, uh, not really... I mean, they show up, and I feed them..." He caught her expression in the mirror. "I'll just double-check with Jerry," he added hurriedly, then wiped his face with the towel. She followed him into the other room and watched as he dialed a phone number.

"It's much cheaper to use my cell phone," she commented.

"Eh, you got the bucks."

"Just because I have it, doesn't mean I wish to waste it."

"Cripes, are all vampires such nags?"

She almost laughed, but managed to keep looking stern.

"Yeah, Jerry? It's me, Liam... yeah, listen, you mind keeping an eye on my place for a couple days? Yeah, the cats pretty much take care of themselves... they keep the mice population down in the barn so you don't gotta worry about feeding them, and there's fresh water over by the pump, but just... uh... check in on 'em every day or so? You mind? Yeah, I'll be back—what? *No*, Sophie and me didn't run off together. I mean, we did, but we'll be back... right?" He raised his eyebrows at her. "We'll be back? Yeah, she's nodding... uh-huh. None of your damn business, and thanks for watching the cats." He hung up. "There, can I finish shaving now?"

"Yes, please," she said, still trying not to laugh. Embarrass was a small town; she could just imagine the storm of gossip that had arisen when she and Liam had disappeared together.

He muttered something as he passed her, but even her attuned vampire hearing didn't catch it. It sounded like, "Women." Such things, it seemed, transcended age.



"I just don't think—"

"I'm goin'."

"But I'm not sure you realize—"

"Goin'."

"But it isn't necessary for you to—"

"Sophie."

"But—"

"Sophie."

She slumped back against the seat and sighed, something she didn't often do. He was impossible. Implacable. Men! She'd forgotten how oddly protective they could get after a little hip-bumping.

The last thing she needed was to bring a sheep to the library; Marjorie was a little touchy on subjects like that. The head librarian was so old, and so infinitely crafty, most people were drooling idiots in comparison. Especially most humans, who had only a fraction of her life span and knowledge. Subsequently, the old vampire didn't suffer fools lightly. Liam wasn't a fool, but compared to Marjorie...

Well, this was for the greater good, and the thought of restraining Liam—knocking him out, somehow, like they did in the movies?—did not sit well with her. She would just have to...

Her truck door swung open and Liam stuck his head in. "You coming?"

"Yes," she replied through gritted teeth. "In fact, would you kindly follow me."

"No problem," he said, cheerful now that he saw he was getting his way. He pointedly ignored all her glares and sulks and followed her into the building, which looked like an abandoned warehouse.

Inside, of course, was a different story.

"Huh," Liam said, looking around. "Looks a lot smaller from the outside."

"Good evening, Sophie," Marjorie said, standing right beside the main desk, looking (as she always did) as if she had been waiting just for them.

"Marjorie," she replied, and they kissed on both cheeks. She didn't bother introducing Liam; Marjorie wouldn't have cared. "I'm not here to relax and read, I'm afraid. I need to meet with the queen tonight. Can you arrange it?"



Marjorie wrinkled her brow. She was a tallish woman with excellent posture and black hair streaked with gray. Her dark eyes were cold, though, and any resemblance to someone's youngish grandmother was strictly imaginary. "I don't keep her appointments, I'm afraid. But I can give you directions to her house."

"You mean just... go there?"

Marjorie shrugged apologetically. "It's how things are done now."

"Since Nostro was killed?"

"Yes. The new queen is somewhat... relaxed in her rules."

"Well, there's nothing for it," Sophie said, nibbling on her lower lip. "I must speak with her. It can't wait another night."

"Of course. You're in luck, too," she added, nodding in Liam's direction. "She's fond of sheep. She has a couple of them herself."

"Uh..."

"Excuse me," Liam said. "I was having a little trouble with that one. What's a *mouton*?"

Startled, Sophie realized she and Marjorie had been speaking in French the entire time. "Liam, I apologize. When Marjorie greeted us in French I just slipped into it—"

"That's okay. I was gettin' most of it. All those *For Dummies* books and tapes are really good," he added.

Sophie blinked. "You studied French on your own?" Of course he did, she realized. The high school didn't offer it. Only Spanish.

"Well... yeah. Because you... I mean, nobody in town knows anything about you, except that you're French. And I thought, you know, if I knew your language, we could maybe..." He shrugged. "I dunno."

Overcome, Sophie was for a moment unable to speak. She merely gaped at him like a fish while Marjorie shifted her weight impatiently. Finally, she turned to the older woman and managed, "We'll take that map, thank you."

"I've got it right here for you."

Wordlessly, Sophie took the piece of paper. As Marjorie always looked as though she was waiting for whoever came to see her, she also always had exactly what that person needed. The older vampires were all used to it.



"Thank you for coming by," the librarian was saying. "And thank you for bringing your sheep. He smells divine."

"I ain't a sheep," Liam said flatly. His midwestern drawl, usually pleasant and unassuming, had hardened. "I'm a man. *Her* man."

Marjorie smirked, but Sophie was suddenly ashamed. Equally suddenly, she didn't care for the smile on Marjorie's face. "Of course, Liam. I—I—" She had no clue what to say. Should she apologize? But Marjorie had been the one who had given offense. Although she herself had referred to Liam as a sheep, in her mind. Should she—

"Really, that's charming," Marjorie said. Her smirk had widened until she looked like a gray-haired jack-o'-lantern. "If you get tired of this one, Sophie darling, I do hope—"

"You want to step outside and talk about it some more?" he interrupted.

"Liam!" Sophie nearly shrieked.

"What? I'm a feminist. 'Sides, she's probably got six hundred years on me."

"Eight hundred," Marjorie said dryly.

"Anyways, I'm an equal opportunity ass-kicker. Nobody talks to me that way. I might be a nobody from some small town, but I'm not... you know. A nobody."

Sophie fought the urge to bury her face in her hands.

Meanwhile, Marjorie's brow wrinkled as she digested that, and then she smiled, quite naturally. "I don't want to step outside with you. And I apologize if I offended you. I'm just used to things being... a certain way."

"Yes, well, just a simple misunderstanding, we must be going now," Sophie said, almost babbled, seizing Liam's arm so hard he winced. "Thank you for the information."

"You're so welcome." She shook Liam's hand. "So nice to meet you. Please stop by anytime. The library is not restricted to the undead." She said this with such total sincerity, Sophie almost believed her.

"Yeah, well. Guess I got a little hot under the collar."

"Yes, you did." Marjorie's eyes were veiled, and a smoky gray. "It was quite... interesting. As I said. Stop by anytime."

"Say, anybody ever tell you, you're kind of cute? I—ow!"



"Good-bye," Sophie called, and practically dragged him out by the hair.

8

SOPHIE was still crabbing away at him while they were going up the sidewalk. The gist of it was "Never pick fights with vampires," like any fool didn't know that. But there was a big difference between keeping your head down and letting someone pull it off and hand it to you. Maybe French people didn't get that.

"... so unbelievably arrogant, so completely dangerous..."

He let her sweet, accented bitching fade out as he stared around at the place. Summit Avenue in St. Paul was pretty famous for big digs, but this! Every mansion on the street was nicer than the last, and the one they were standing in front of was the nicest of all. It was humongous, like something out of an old movie, a massive white structure with black shutters. It didn't feel evil, though Sophie told him the queen of the vampires lived there.

"I guess we should go knock," Sophie said timidly, which startled the hell out of him. He didn't think she was afraid of *anything*. Come to think of it, she'd been very deferential to the librarian, too. Maybe she just wasn't used to being around her own kind. Maybe she'd moved to Embarrass for more than a fresh start. "Yes. Let's do that. We'll knock."

"Okeydokey," he agreed.

As they stepped up to the gigantic, wraparound porch, the front door suddenly opened and a good-looking young man in his mid-twenties came out. He was wearing green scrubs and had a hospital ID around his neck with a terrible picture on it. His hair was dark and cut very short, and his green eyes were clear and friendly.

"Hi there," he said, jingling his car keys. "Come to visit? Go on in. I'd stay and, you know, do the polite intros, but I'm late and you're not here to see me anyway. Right? Right. So, 'bye."

He hurried down the steps, throwing a distracted wave over his shoulder, then disappeared around the corner toward the detached garage.



They watched him go, bemused, then Sophie turned and looked back up at the house.

"We can just... go in?"

"Guess so," Liam replied and opened the front door. After seeing the outside of the house, he was a little more prepared for the beauty and opulence of the foyer. He could hear voices coming from a large room on their right, and turned in that direction. Sophie clutched his arm, pulling him back. "Sophie, what is *with* you?"

She was chewing on her lower lip so hard, he expected to see it start bleeding. If she could bleed. "It's just? I met Nostro. And he was horrible. Horrible. And if she beat him? But we have to bring this to her," she added, seeming to straighten with remembered pride. "It's our? *my*—responsibility."

"Right," he said. "Calm down, ease up. You look great, don't worry about it." And she did. Her glossy brown hair was piled up on top of her head, being held in place by the miracle of a single hair clip. She was wearing a dark red suit, light-colored stockings, and black shoes. She was pale, but then, she was always pale. He thought she looked like a million bucks. In fact, as he'd watched her pull up her stockings in their hotel room (he didn't know gals even wore stockings and garter belts anymore), he'd been unable to resist jumping her bones again, and they'd had a wonderful time rolling around on the floor.

She hadn't bitten him that time, politely explaining afterward that she was still satisfied from the night before. He knew she was lying; he could tell by the way her gaze kept shifting from his eyes to the bruise forming on his neck. But he didn't push it, figuring she had other things on her mind.

"You look nice, too," she told him, which was a laugh, because he was wearing jeans (clean, at least) and an old blue flannel shirt (also clean). Well, he didn't think the big shot queen would much care *what* he was wearing.

He gripped Sophie's hand, surprised as always by its pleasant coolness, and practically pulled her into the next room.

"... and they're doing really well, pretty well, I mean, they'll still kill and eat anybody who gets too close, anybody human I mean, but I'm keeping a pretty close watch and, um, I guess that's all."



The girl speaking was smaller than Sophie, which was pretty damn small. She had red hair and the skinniest, palest arms and legs Liam had ever seen. She was wearing a pleated black skirt and a white blouse, and little white socks and loafers, looking for all the world like a schoolgirl. In fact, she probably *was* a schoolgirl. Didn't look a day over fifteen.

"Very good, Alice," a deep voice said. Liam looked, then looked again. He'd thought it was a shadowy corner, but there was a man sitting in a tall wingbacked chair, a big man, tall and scary-looking and Liam wanted to turn around, cool as a cuke, and walk right of there and back to the truck and then drive all the way back to Embarrass, checking the rearview the entire time. "Once again, I must ask if you wish to be relieved of your duties. You've been at this for several months and—"

"Majesty, I love this job, and I wish to keep on doing it. Before I wanted to because, you know, with the new, uh, regime, I wasn't really sure of my place. So I figured, you know. But now... I—I kind of like them," she finished, staring down at her shoes.

"Them?" the man asked, distaste clear in his tone.

"Happy, Skippy, Trippy, Sandy, Benny, Clara, Jane, and George." She smiled weakly. "George's my favorite."

"You've *named* them?"

Liam wondered who *them* was. He bumped into something, and he suddenly realized he'd backed all the way up into the door, totally unconsciously. He told himself to get a grip. They were just vampires, for Christ's sake.

He forced himself to look around the room while the vampires talked about *them*, tearing his gaze away from the scary guy sitting in the corner. There were three other people in the room; the first one he noticed was a petite, great-looking blonde standing behind and slightly to the left of the guy's chair. Even from across the room, he could see how dark and pretty her big eyes were, fixed now on the girl. And she was so small, she easily fit behind the corner chair. The guy seemed totally unaware of her, but he'd cock his head when she'd bend down to whisper to him, and besides, Liam had the feeling no one snuck up on this guy.

There was also a dark-green couch (he supposed some fancy magazine would call it "moss green" or whatever) in the middle of the room, and two women were sitting on it, playing checkers. The one closest to him was a good-looking black gal (shit, he'd never seen this many gorgeous



people outside of a Hollywood movie). She was way too thin, with her hair so tightly pulled back he could practically see her skull throbbing, but her skin was a gorgeous dark brown and she had a look about her he really liked, as if she didn't take a lot of shit.

The other one... he glanced at her, and then his gaze came back, as it had with the man.

She was as cute as a bug's butt, as Sophie would have said (when she got excited, Liam noticed she mixed up her metaphors). Her hair was blond, but much shorter than the other woman's, and the light tossed reddish glints into it. She was sitting cross-legged, in tan shorts and a navy blue sweater buttoned to her chin. She wore shoes the color of her sweater, shoes that had a little heel and emphasized the long, pretty shape of her foot. She was watching the other woman's hands and swung her foot while she waited her turn, occasionally peeking at her shoes and smiling.

She looked up at him (and, presumably, Sophie), and he saw her eyes were a cross between green and blue, the color of the ocean in a postcard. Her chin was pointed, giving her a sharp, foxlike appearance, and her cheekbones were high, emphasizing the prettiness of her eyes and the smoothness of her brow. He had an odd urge to stroke her forehead, which mercifully passed. It helped to glance back at Sophie now and again.

"Hey," she said casually, turning the full force of her sea-colored gaze on him, and he nearly fell down. Staring at her was like staring at the door to heaven. It promised delights beyond compare... but didja *really* want to leave everything you ever knew behind?

"So, anyway, Your Majesties," the schoolgirl was saying, "the Fiends are just fine, healthy as can be... I guess... and they—"

The spectacular blonde on the couch stood so fast, he didn't actually see it. One second she was leaning over, about to get kinged, the next she was standing and pointing (uh-oh) at Sophie, and the redhead was cowering away from her.

"*What...*" she began, "is *on...* your *shoes?*"

Sophie looked down at her feet, then back up. "Ah... Your Majesty, my name is Dr. Sophie Tourneau, and this is—may I present my... uh... my friend, Mr. Liam—"



"Seriously. It looks like you plowed through—God, is that *shit*? Is that *shit* on your shoes?"

"Elizabeth," the man in the corner sighed.

"Oh, boy," the black gal said. "Here we go."

"They were, uh, a gift, uh..." Sophie sounded completely rattled and Liam almost smiled. Shoes, they were talking about shoes, of all the dumbest things! "And I? I'm a vet, an animal doctor, and sometimes I wear them on the job... and... and..."

"So you're telling me it *is* shit?" Liam thought the blonde was going to pass out. "Jesus Christ in an Easter parade!" Everyone (except him) visibly flinched. "How could you... *do* that? I mean, that's why God made Payless Shoes. You want to tromp around in the shit? I—I—" She put a hand to her brow, and Liam noticed she had pretty hands with long fingers. The nails were done in that what-do-you-call it, with the white tips. French manicure. "You just can't—can't come in here—*dressed* like that—your poor *feet*—"

"Unless it's really important." The woman standing behind the fella piped up. It was the first time she'd spoken loud enough for him to hear. "As I'm sure it is."

"Aren't you French? You sound French. Aren't French people supposed to have style?"

"Uh-huh," the black gal said. "Also, African-Americans have rhythm, and white girls can't dance. Especially you, white girl."

"*You* stay out of this." The blonde—surely this wasn't the queen?—suddenly collapsed onto the couch, nearly kicking over the checkers game. "Well, I can't be expected to listen to this! The whole thing is stupid anyway, I was *totally* against it—"

"We know," everybody but Liam and Sophie said.

"... and thought it was, just, *so* massively lame, but I put up with it without bitching—much—and all these dead people trooping through my house—"

"Excuse me," the black lady said, not looking up from the board. "Through *my* house."

"I told you to quit holding that over my head! Where the hell was I?"

"Dead people trooping through your house," Liam said helpfully.



"Right. Right! *Thank* you. And they're in and out of here like I'm fucking King Solomon—what, they can't solve their own problems?—and now I gotta see shoes abused and I can't take it!" She threw her arm over her face and lapsed into silence. Finally.

Sophie's mouth was opening and closing like a walleye, but she wasn't saying anything. And all the vampires—he guessed they were all vampires—were staring at them. Except for the guy. He was staring at the blonde and smiling, a little. So finally Liam coughed and said, "Well, there's a bad vampire and he's killing girls up north." *Now* the guy was looking at him, along with everybody else. Even the blonde was peeking at him from under her arm. "We just, y'know, thought you oughta know."

The queen sat up. "Oh, *fuck*."

"Yup," Liam agreed.

9

"YOU'RE kidding me. Right? You're kidding. I mean, that's nasty. That's just... yerrggh."

"Yup," Liam agreed. He took another drink of his smoothie. They had trooped into an enormous kitchen, the guy had fired up two blenders and brought a ton of fruit and orange juice out of the fridge, and now they were sitting around like old friends, slurping down strawberry smoothies. Except for him. His was strawberry-banana. "That's what we thought. Sophie figured it out."

"When?" the guy asked. He had introduced himself as Eric Sinclair, but everybody except Jessica (the black gal) called him Majesty or My King or Shitheap (the spunky blonde, it appeared, didn't like him). Speaking of the blonde, her name was Betsy and, yup, she *was* the queen. The other blonde's name was Tina and she was very deferential to Shitheap and Betsy. Alice, the schoolgirl, had politely excused herself and left.

"I beg your pardon?" Sophie asked, her glass rattling as she set it down. She was a little more relaxed than when they'd arrived, but not much. Liam couldn't blame her. It wasn't every day you met a king and queen. Luckily, they weren't *his* king and queen, so he could be his regular old self. "Your Majesty, did you ask me when?"



"Last night," Liam began, helping her out a little, "we were watching the news and Sophie saw this story and put it all together.

"She's really smart," he added. "Smartest person in Embarrass."

"I'm sure that's true," Shitheap said, smiling at Sophie, which seemed to calm her down a little.

"Up by Babbitt Lake?" Jessica asked.

Liam chewed a small piece of banana that had escaped the blender's whirring blades. "Yeah, you know it?"

"My dad used to take me fishing there when I was little."

"Well, we, me and Sophie, live there. She's our vet."

"And you saw this man on the news..." Sinclair prompted.

"... and decided to come up and wreck my night," the queen finished. When they all stared at her, she had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry. That sounded less jerky in my head."

"We didn't see *him*," Sophie said. "We saw the father of one of the girls on the news. So Liam drove me down—"

"You didn't feel the need to keep this in the, uh, community?" Tina asked.

"She tried," Liam said simply.

There was a short silence, broken by the queen's muffled giggle, then Sophie continued. "We drove down and spoke to the girl's mother. I don't think there's much doubt, or I certainly would not be bothering you with this."

"Ugh! He dates these girls, makes them love him, then *dumps* them to watch them go all suicidal with despair?"

"Yup."

"What a shit!" Betsy was on her feet. "Let's go up to Embarrass and kick his ass!"

"It's not in Embarrass," Sophie began, but Sinclair interrupted her.

"I quite agree. This behavior is not acceptable in the least. Also, it's messy and people are bound to notice."

"Here we go," Jessica said into her smoothie.

"Messy? It's messy?" The queen looked around, but Jessica and Tina were hurriedly clearing all the empty glasses off the small table. Nothing was within throwing reach. "How about, 'He's a shit and we're gonna



stake his ass.' How about, 'Those poor girls, let's avenge them.' How about *anything* besides messy?"

"He did say anything besides messy," Liam pointed out. "He said it wasn't acceptable behavior. Which I guess it's not."

"Dude: so not talking to you." The queen gave him a good glare, so he hung tight to his glass. "I don't—"

"So, you're the queen of all the vampires, huh?"

That took the wind out of her sails. "Yeah, I guess," she replied, and her shoulders slumped.

"So all the vampires have to do what you say?"

"No," Eric Sinclair said.

"And I'm not a vampire," Jessica said. "I'm just a hanger-on."

"Me, too, I guess," he joked.

"You shut up, too. Everybody shut up. And to answer your question... uh, I'm sorry, your friend told me your name but I—"

"Liam."

"Right. Anyway, they're supposed to, but I don't want 'em to, and a lot of them don't listen anyway."

"But that's not because you're resisting your destiny or anything," Jessica said, smirking at him.

"Jess! Repeat after me: not helpful."

"With all due respect, Your Majesties, shouldn't we be driving north? He could be seducing another girl this minute." Sophie's expression darkened. "He could be breaking up with another girl this minute."

"He could feel the tip of my shoe up his ass in another minute," the queen vowed, slipping off of her stool. "Jess, you stay here."

"Oh, come on," she protested. "I always miss out on the good stuff."

"If by *good* you mean hideously dangerous, then yeah, you do. Look, it's vampire business, anyway. And last I looked, you were alive."

"Then *he* shouldn't go, either," Jessica said, pointing at Liam.

"It's my truck," he said mildly.

"Shit, it's my *house*," she said, starting to pout. Some women couldn't pull it off, and some looked charming as hell when they tried. Jessica was one of the latter. "That doesn't stop them from leaving me out all the time."



"What is the sound of one woman bitching?" Betsy asked the air. "If nobody's around to hear the sound of Jessica bitching, does she actually bitch?"

"Oh, you're so evicted."

"She's right, though," Sinclair said mildly. "It's inappropriate for Liam to come with us if we leave Jessica behind."

"Tough shit," he said. "I'm going."

Betsy's eyebrows arched but, shockingly, she said nothing.

"Sophie's not facing down some bad killer vampire without me, and that's how it is."

"So there, Sinclair." To Liam, Betsy said, "Good for you. It's kind of romantic. Totally annoying, but romantic."

"You're right, yes, you certainly are," Sinclair said smoothly. Liam was having trouble looking away from the man's deep, dark gaze. "However, I—"

Suddenly, he couldn't see Sinclair anymore. After a second, he realized Sophie's hands had shot out, covering his eyes.

"Sir," she was saying, "please don't. He's been so good to me. So helpful. And it is his truck. And he wasn't afraid to come. He's known about me and he... he deserves to come."

"If he's going, I'm going," Jessica said crossly. "I've earned the right to come, too."

Gently, Liam pushed Sophie's hands down. He guessed the guy was going to hypnotize him or whatever, and he was grateful for her intervention. "Come or stay, but let's get going. Sophie's right. Time's wasting."

"You guys!" Jessica wailed.

Betsy shook her head. "Too dangerous."

Tina nodded hers. "She's right, Jessica."

"But inconsistent and annoying if we take him and not her," Sinclair added.

"Look, Jess, let's settle this fair and fast, okay? Rock, paper, scissors?" Betsy asked.

Jessica brightened. "Sure."



Both women's left hands fisted. "Rock, paper, scissors," they chanted in unison.

Then, "Shit!"

10

"POOR Jessica." Betsy was gloating. "She always goes for scissors."

"I'm sorry about your shoe," Sophie said. They were on cell phones. Sophie and Liam were in his truck. The vampire king and queen were following in an electric blue GT Mustang convertible. Odd that such a cool and controlled man had such a flashy car, but it was none of Sophie's business. "I do think she shouldn't have thrown the left one in the blender."

"She's got a temper," Betsy agreed, "and she knew just where to stick it to me. That's okay. I'll steal her credit card and get it fixed at the leather shop. Worry about *your* shoes. Seriously." Sophie heard the queen laugh, then the click of a disconnect.

"Well, I guess they'll follow us up there and we'll... you know." Sophie paused, then sighed. "Are you not speaking to me?"

"That was the plan. I guess with all the lecturing, you didn't notice. Then we were talking to the other vampires and I forgot I wasn't talking to you."

"It's the sheep thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's the sheep thing," he said, sounding annoyed. "Shit, what else would it be?"

"I promise, I won't refer to you like that again, and I won't allow anyone to—"

"It's not that, Sophie. *Sheep* is just a word. It's *you*. I'm sure you're older than I am... I just don't know how much older. And I don't care. But you do. Right?"

"It's not that I... care, exactly," she said slowly. "I'm just used to things being a certain way."

"Yeah, well, I love you."

"What?"



"I figured, best to get that out of the way," he explained, as if he hadn't just said a shocking thing, as if he hadn't changed everything. "You know, being in love with you. The thing is, I've always loved you. And I've always wanted you. And I knew you were a vampire and I knew you were pretty old—"

"Not *that* old," she said, her vanity pricking her. "Not for a vampire. I'm not even a hundred yet."

"Yeah, well, I'm just saying, I don't care about any of that, I care about *you*. But this won't work unless you don't care, either."

"Liam, you drop this bombshell on me—"

"Yep," he said cheerfully.

"—all in the last forty-eight hours... do you realize that before Tuesday, we'd never spent any time together that wasn't pet-related? You have to admit, this is all very fast."

"Yep. I have to admit that."

"Well, you have to give me some time." She folded her arms across her chest, feeling stupid and happy and annoyed and afraid.

"How much time?"

"More than two days," she snapped. "It shouldn't be a problem, since you've been waiting your entire life to be with me, right? So you can give me another forty-eight hours?"

"I'm glad you hit me over the head with that right away," he retorted. "I wouldn't want you to wait."

"I'm just saying." If she could have blushed, she would have. That had sounded much worse out loud than she had meant. She was just... surprised. She hadn't a clue he had such deep feelings for her. All this time, and he never told her.

"You never told me."

"Well, I was waiting for exactly the right time."

"A vampire serial killer throwing us together? That was the right time?"

"Well, yeah."

"And there's a lot more to it than love, you know." She said this with triumph, as if she were thinking of reasons to make him be wrong about loving her.



"Sophie, what the hell are you talking about?"

"There's the issue of how I need blood to survive."

"Yeah, I know."

"Liam: I drink blood from living donors in order to function. I have to do it a *lot*."

"So? I have to eat regular food to survive."

"It's not the same thing."

"But it doesn't make you a bad person, right?"

"No," she said slowly. "Feeding... biting and taking blood... it's like any weapon, I think. You've got a shotgun at home, yes? Well, is it a good shotgun or a bad shotgun?"

"Guess that depends," he replied. "If I use it to blow the head off a serial vampire scumbag killer, it's a good one. If I used it to, I dunno, hurt a kid or whatever, it's a bad one."

"Well, I think feeding is much the same. I could have hurt you. I could have killed you."

"I think you *did* kill me," he said cheerfully.

She didn't smile. "I'm being serious, Liam."

"Yeah, I can tell by the way you're sucking all the enjoyment out of this moment."

"And I'll outlive you," she continued doggedly, "unless we take steps."

"I know."

"I don't think you do."

"There it is again."

"What?"

"That I'm a vampire and a lot older, and so I'm smarter and just in general better than you."

"That's ridiculous!" she cried, freshly stung.

"Ha!"

"Ha yourself."

They didn't say another word until they got to the town where the last girl, Shawna, had lived and died. Then Liam said, "I'd prefer to ride with Betsy."



"You took the words right out of my head," she snapped, her idioms suffering, as always, when she was angry. She swung her door open and jumped out of the truck. "I'll send her over."

"Good."

"Good!" She stomped over to the king and queen, who looked to be in the middle of their own lover's spat.

"You don't suck like ordinary people suck, by the way. You suck like Academy Award-sucking. If there was an Oscar handed out for Most Sucking, you'd have it locked."

"You've got to come up with something new. Anything new."

"Excuse me, Majesties," she interrupted, her nervousness in their presence evaporating. She could be angry or she could be nervous, but apparently she couldn't be both. "Liam would like the queen to ride with him."

"Ride with...oh, right. The B and B thing." Shawna's mother had told them the killer was staying at a local bed-and-breakfast. There were two in town; they didn't know which one she had meant. So they had decided to split up. Originally each couple would make a team. Not any longer. "That's fine with me. Later, Sinclair." She walked over to Liam, who had gotten out and was standing beside the truck. "Hey, can I drive?"

He wordlessly handed her the keys, then walked around to the passenger's side. Sophie waited for a moment. For an apology? Whose?

"Dr. Trudeau, we need to be going," Sinclair told her.

"Sir," she replied miserably, and fell into step behind him.

11

"WHAT'S the matter?" Betsy asked him. She was so tall, she didn't have to adjust the seat, just the rearview mirror. "Did you guys have a big wicked fight, or what?"

"Something like that."

"I know what that's like."



"Mmm," he replied, secretly doubting she had the tiniest clue. Nice enough gal, and super-pretty, but a regular guy like him didn't have much in common with the queen of the vampires. "Okay."

"Dude, seriously. I'm supposed to be the consort of a guy who's totally arrogant and sneaky and has, like, eighty hidden agendas."

"You're supposed to be?"

"Don't even get me started. It's a whole long story, and I come off really bad in it. But so does Sinclair! Anyway—"

"You've got something..." He pointed to her neck, where three mosquitoes were currently having a party. He guessed... did mosquitoes bother vampires?

"What?" She brushed in the wrong spot, as people always did when told they had something on them. "What? Did I get it?"

"Here, I—" He brushed at her neck, and was startled when something snagged his finger. Well, he was pretty bad at this stuff. "Aw, shit, now I'm caught on something..." He pulled back, surprised to find a gold chain entwined on the end of his finger, and even more surprised to find a cross dangling from the end of the chain.

"Oh, crap! The chain broke!"

"I can fix it," he told her, since she seemed pretty upset about it.

"It's just, Sinclair gave it to me. I wouldn't want anything... it's nice, right?"

"Right." He stared at it in wonder... she *was* a vampire, correct? "Let me hold on to it for you, and I'll fix it when we're done tonight."

"Thanks. It used to belong to his sister, I guess it's a family heirloom thing. I wouldn't want anything to happen to it, is all. Anyway, where was I?"

"I'm sorry," Liam said. "But I've just gotta know. You're a vampire, right? The queen of them? What are you doing carrying around a cross? And if Sinclair gave it to you... I guess it's just an old wives' tale, huh?"

"Oh no, no," she assured him, stomping on the clutch and shifting into third. "Sorry, didn't mean to go all Bela Lugosi mysterious-ee on you. I haven't been a vampire very long... just a few months."

"That's why crosses don't work on you?"

"No, no. Nothing works on me. Crosses normally burn the crap out of a regular vampire, but I guess I'm special." She said it glumly, as if it wasn't



a good thing at all. "Crosses don't burn me, and holy water makes me sneeze, and stakes through the chest don't work, but they sure wreck my clothes."

"That's too bad," he said, because he had to say something. "About your clothes, I mean."

"Tell me. My dry cleaner totally freaks out when I come near him these days. Anyway, crosses would burn Sinclair, except he got that one way back when his sister died, before he was a vampire."

"Oh."

"Okay? Everything cleared up?"

"Uh, sure," he said, pretending he heard this sort of thing all the time. Of course, very little had been cleared up. Why was this woman so special? Why had Eric Sinclair, whom she professed to dislike, given her a family heirloom, a religious symbol, no less? Could she be killed? *Should* she be killed?

He guessed he'd never know, and wasn't sure if that was good news, or bad.

"Now where was I? Oh, right, the jerkiness of Eric Sinclair."

"And the whole consort thing," he prompted her, pocketing the necklace.

"So, I'm supposed to just throw all my doubts aside and be his wife for, like, a thousand years or whatever. And nobody can understand why I'm not getting with the program." She laughed, sounding a little bitter. "Just forget everything I've ever learned and trust some guy who's as scary as he is good-looking."

Hmm. Wasn't that what he expected Sophie to do? Toss aside all she had learned, all she was, because he was mortal and he demanded it? Maybe her *thing* was more his problem than hers.

"Helloooooo?" Betsy was saying, waving a hand in front of her face and steadying the steering wheel with the other. "My lips are moving; it's polite to pretend to listen."

"I heard every word," he assured her.

"IT seems your evening has been almost as stressful as mine."



"Sir, you have no idea." She glanced over at him and was surprised to see a compassionate expression on his face. "I've had a lot thrown at me in the last few hours, that's all. I'm certainly not going to bore you with it."

"I'm interested," was all he said, so she found herself telling him the entire story... her loneliness since her friend had died; how wonderful Liam was; how she didn't know he had loved her in secret all those years; how wonderful Liam was (when he wasn't being a tiresome pig-head); how he seemingly accepted her vampire nature; how wonderful Liam was... all of it.

"It sounds like a *wonderful* problem to have."

"Sir, it's not that simple."

"No?"

"Sometimes it's... easier to stay by yourself."

"Keep the status quo, you mean."

"Yes."

"It's certainly safer."

"Yes." She saw where he was going and gave voice to her biggest fear. "He's a child with a crush."

"He looked full-grown to me. He also looks like a man who knows what he wants."

"Hmph."

They had finished searching the bed-and-breakfast, which was free of guests except for a couple on their honeymoon, currently enjoying themselves behind a closed bedroom door. No serial killers in *that* room.

Sophie was embarrassed; for a while she'd completely forgotten that there was quite a bit more at stake than her love life. But she and the king were almost half-hearted about the search; their enhanced senses had already told them the B and B was virtually deserted, but it was always best to make sure.

"Thank you for listening," she said, following him back out the front door. "I appreciate your advice and will think hard about what you've said."

"I didn't say much," he replied mildly. "Compared to my queen, I'm not much of a talker."



"Is that some kind of slam, pal? Because if you wanna go, we'll go." Betsy was walking through the front yard, Liam on her heels. "No luck at the other place. They've got a full house, and none of them are our guy. It's all couples."

"Couples like the killer with his new girlfriend?" Sophie asked.

"Naw," Liam said. "Couples like retired people on vacation. You guys didn't have any luck?"

"How could you search an entire house, then drive across town and be here just as we finished?" Sinclair asked.

"Dude: have you *seen* this town? It's, like, a mile long. Is it our fault we're way more efficient at looking for killers than you two are? I'm telling you, our guy's not there."

"Well, he isn't here either," Sophie said. "Damn it all. We'll have to go back and talk to Shawna's mother some more, poor thing. I was hoping we could leave her out of it."

Liam was looking at the wooden sign over the front door. "This is the Rose Manor. But The Garden Bed-and-Breakfast is the one we're looking for. We just assumed this was The Garden, because it's the other B and B you can see from the road. But..."

"There's another one," Sinclair said immediately. "Probably called The Iris or something tiresome like that. But since the same people own and run them both, they're considered one business. We checked the one across town, and we checked this one, because those are the two businesses."

A quick trip inside to speak with the owner confirmed their suspicions; there was indeed one other B and B called The Garden.

"Stupid," Liam said disgustedly. "We should have checked. Never assume, that's what my mom always said."

"I don't understand," Sophie said. "We checked the two in town. What are you talking about?"

"There's three in town, and they're all under the business name The Garden, because they're all owned by the same family. We checked two of them... you and Sinclair checked The Rose, Betsy and I checked The Tulip." At her mystified expression, he continued. "Those are the names of the *individual* houses, though they're all under the same business name.



But there's one more, like the guy said inside. And it'll have another flower name, like Sinclair said."

"I guess it makes sense for the bad guy to make it hard for us to track him down," Betsy said. "I know I'm totally confused. But if there's another one, there's another one. Let's go check it out."

Five minutes later, they were standing at the end of a long driveway outside a third Victorian with yet another flower motif.

"The Sweetheart Rose," Sinclair said. "I was close."

"We're *assuming* he's even still there," Betsy said. "If it was me, I'd be long gone."

"He's not going anywhere," Sophie said as Sinclair nodded agreement. "With the funeral, and the reporters, and all the mourners... there's too much here for him still."

"Prick," Betsy commented, and this time, everyone nodded.

12

THE villain met them on the front steps.

This was startling, to say the least.

"Hello," he said cheerfully. "I was just leaving to go break another girl's heart, so I only have a minute."

Sophie felt like hitting him. With luck, she would soon be doing exactly that. "You *what?*"

"Dude, you are so busted," Betsy told him. Then, to Sinclair, "This kind of takes of fun out of it. No big showdown scene. Unless this is it."

"You killed all those girls," Sophie said, beginning to recover. She had a horrible feeling she knew why the youngish-looking man seemed so unconcerned. "It's the same as if you had..." She groped for the words. "Shot them or used a knife on them."

"Yes, I know." She could see why he passed for a premed student; he didn't look a day over twenty-five. He was short, only a few inches taller than she was, with hair that was exactly between blond and brown. He had pleasant features and looked rather like anyone else on the street, in his denim jacket and khaki slacks. His eyes were wide-set and brown.



They were the only feature that gave him away. They glittered like a snake's. "I've been meaning to get down to Minneapolis and..." He cut himself off and laughed. "Okay, that's a lie. I've been up here having some fun, for a change."

Sophie was staring at him. They were all, she realized, staring at him. Betsy was right. This was a very odd way to go about catching a killer. "For a change?" she finally asked, when no one else said anything.

"Sure. I mean, working for Nostro, talk about all work and no play making me a dull boy. I actually missed the big fight, when this guy here"—he nodded at Sinclair—"took control of the whole shebang. I was out getting Nostro some more girls."

"You brought him victims."

"Sure."

"And when he wasn't holding your leash any longer," Sinclair went on with terrifying pleasantness, "you decided to come and... how did you put it? Have some fun?"

"Sure." The killer looked puzzled. "Look, I know I should have come down and paid my respects, but you haven't been in power that long, and I figured I had time—"

"We're not here about *that*," Betsy said, exasperated. "Jeez. Like we care if you come down to the cities and kiss our asses, or pretend to kiss our asses, which is way worse. We're here to stop you from killing anybody else."

The killer's brow wrinkled as he struggled with the alien concept. "But... why? Do you need my help with something? I'll be glad to go back to Minneapolis—"

"Dude... We. Don't. Want. You. To. Kill. Anybody. Else."

"Because. It's. Wrong," Sophie added.

"Do you mean, it's wrong because I'm not letting you have a crack at the girls? I could—"

"Stop talking now," Sinclair said.

"Do you believe this guy?" Betsy cried, turning to the group. "He's not getting this at *all*. He—" Her eyes narrowed as she took in the expression on Sophie's face, and the identical one on Sinclair's. "You guys totally expected this!"

"Well..." Sophie began, but had no idea where to go from there.



"This is a regular thing for vampires?" Liam asked, his displeasure evident.

"No," Sophie said. "Er... all right, sometimes. Not the making the girls fall in love with him part. But the, ah, other part."

"See? See? *This* is why I'm not getting on board with the whole consort thing," Betsy told him triumphantly. "And why being a vampire makes my skin crawl. Just when I think it might not be a totally insane idea, something like this happens. And you're all, 'Ho hum, another vampire who's a total psycho killer, oh well.'"

"You guys have lost me," the killer interrupted. "You're mad because of the girls? What, you had your eye on one of them? Because if I crossed territory, I really apologize."

"I guess they aren't people to you," Liam said. "They're... what? Sheep?"

The killer laughed. "Not hardly! You're supposed to cherish and protect your sheep. The girls are more like... hors d'oeuvres."

Betsy carefully pushed the sleeve of her sweater up, almost to her elbow, then socked the killer in the face.

"Ow!" he cried, clapping a hand to his nose. "What was that for?"

"Where to begin?" Sophie replied.

"That was a good start," Sinclair said, "but start in the groin area next time. And use knives instead of your hands."

Betsy shuddered. "Ick. Though if anybody deserves it, it's this punk. So, what? Do we arrest him? Can we do that?"

"Can this wait until after Theresa kills herself?" the killer asked nasally. "I was leaving to go watch, but—"

"You mean you're doing it again? Right now? But Shawna's barely a week in her grave!"

"Yeah, well, I thought it'd be fun to do a two-fer, you know, play them off each other, but Shawna was a little more fragile than I thought, she kind of jumped the gun on me—" Then he stopped, because Sinclair had picked him up by the throat.

"Where does Theresa live?" Silence, followed by Sinclair adding, "Oh, good, I can beat it out of you. Several times."

"Sinclair, he can't talk, you're squishing his vocal cords," Betsy pointed out. "Not that we want you to stop or anything."



Sinclair let go, and the killer fell to the lawn and gurgled a street address. "We'll tend to the girl," the king said, grabbing Betsy's hand and pulling her toward the car. She yelped, but let herself be dragged away. "You two take care of him. Frankly, if I have to look at him for another ten seconds... you two deal with it."

"What's *that* mean?" Liam asked as Sinclair tore out of the small driveway.

"Drown him, stab him, choke him, slice him, squeeze him, starve him, burn him," Sophie suggested.

"What is everybody's problem tonight?" the killer bitched, standing and trying to brush grass stains off his pants. "You'd think this was about something important."

"Oh, boy," Sophie said. "You're a disgrace to all of us, you wretched horrible thing, and it will be the greatest pleasure of my life to kill you."

"The greatest?" Liam asked.

"Not now, Liam."

"If you saw Shawna's mother," he told the killer, "you might not be so, what's the word?"

"Cavalier," Sophie suggested.

"Asshole. You might not be such an asshole about it."

"I don't have to talk to you, sheep."

"*Don't you call him that.*"

"Don't sweat it, darlin'," Liam said. "I've kind of changed my mind about a couple of things in the last five minutes. I thought you had a thing. Well, you don't. *This* guy does. Whatever problems you and I have, we can work it out."

"That's really touching," the killer said. "I haven't puked in eighty years, but I might right now."

"Oh, Liam, really?" Try to stay focused, you silly cow, she told herself, but it was impossible to deny how incredibly happy those words had made her. "You don't think I'm some vampire snob who can't relate to a mortal because she's seen too much?"

"I do still think that," he admitted, "but, like I said, we can work it out. Doncha think?"



"I do think," she admitted. "I agree, comparably speaking, our troubles don't seem so insurmountable now, do they?"

"I'm still here, you know," the killer reminded them. "Shit, this is why I'm up here in the first place. Decades of being the go-to guy, the guy who can get you what you need, but nobody ever saw me. I was just one of Nostro's stooges."

"I'm sorry for the mean things I said," Sophie said, looking up into Liam's blue, blue eyes. "I was angry, and I was afraid."

He smiled down at her. "That's okay. I said some things, too. Mostly because I was mad."

"Will you guys pay some attention to me? Don't you remember? I'm the guy everybody's mad at?"

"Think they're still holding our room downtown?"

"Probably not. But we could get one up here," she said, reaching up and stroking the new bruise on his neck. Liam shivered and she smiled back at him.

"Dammit!" Abruptly, annoyingly, the killer lunged at them, interrupting what was going to be a wonderful clinch. Liam put up an arm to fling him off... and the killer lunged again.

"Ow! Little son of a bitch bit me." Liam was staring at his now-bloody arm. "Broke the skin, too. Can vampires transmit rabies?"

"How dare you touch him! Nobody bites him but me!"

"You tell him, honey," he added, shaking the blood off his wrist.

Screaming, the killer lunged at them again. Liam, who had been digging in his pocket for a clean handkerchief, again warded him off.

Sophie didn't understand until later what happened next; it was too quick, and it hurt her to watch. Liam had swiped back at the killer, and the killer's screams heightened in pitch until she thought her ear drums might rupture. The killer had actually staggered back—why, Sophie didn't know—and Liam followed up, this time swiping down.

The killer looked down at himself, which was understandable, because he was glowing. Sophie looked at him, and the light hurt her... it had been like trying to see into the middle of the sun.

Liam, either by accident or design, had drawn a line on the killer: from nipple to nipple. And then, from neck to belt buckle.

A cross.



The killer watched in horror—Sophie felt a little horrified, too, in truth—as the lines Liam had drawn on him first glowed, then sank *into* him, like a foot into mud. And, five seconds later, the screaming was cut short as the killer's vocal cords turned into ash... as the killer's entire body turned to ash.

"This never happens," Sophie said, staring. "It's just a movie legend. I've never seen anybody turn into dust before. It just doesn't happen these days."

Liam held out... a necklace? A fine gold chain, with a cross—a cross! Sophie hurriedly looked away from it. "I took it from Betsy. Promised to fix it for her. And I will, too," he added. "Just as soon as we finish some other business." He kicked through the three-foot mound of ashes, scattering it. Then he took her into his arms. "So, I guess I'm your sheep."

"No," she told him. "You're... yourself. Liam. You're Liam."

"I'm a lucky fellow, is what I am." He kissed her.

She kissed him back, then looked at the foot-wide black smudge on the grass, all that was left of Shawna's tormenter. "I'd say so, yes."

Epilogue

"LET me get this straight. You drew a cross on the bad guy with *my* cross? And he turned into dust and went to Hell, or wherever bad vampires go when they turn into dust?"

"Yup."

"Well, shoot. And we missed it!" Betsy dumped more sugar in her coffee. They had come, by mutual agreement, to the Country Kitchen on Highway Six. "Though, we did save Theresa," she admitted, brightening. "That was pretty cool. Sinclair zapped her with his mojo. Made her forget she'd ever met Fuckface. And a good thing, too, because she was starting to get into her dad's gun collection in a really unhealthy way."

"Excellent," Sophie said. "Just excellent."

"And you fixed my necklace! What, you found an all-night jewelry store?"

"I had some tools in the truck," Liam said, looking modest.



"Thank you again for bringing this distasteful business to our attention, Dr. Trudeau," Sinclair said. "If not for your conscientiousness, he might have done a great deal more damage."

She shook her head. "I wish I'd caught on sooner."

"You did everything you could. More than most people would have done, I bet," Liam told her, squeezing her hand. She squeezed back, carefully, and smiled at him. "Oh, man. I ever tell you, you've got the prettiest smile?"

"No. It seems to be one of many things you've been keeping to yourself," she teased.

"Not anymore."

"I have things to tell you, too," she admitted. "Many things."

"Well, we've got plenty of time now. We can tell each other everything."

"I can't wait. Liam, I—I don't think you're a child with a crush."

"I think that might be as close to 'I love you, too' as you will get," Sinclair said.

"Seriously. You guys. We're *right* here." Betsy waved at them from across the table. "I mean, make with the goo-goo eyes a little more, why don't you? Get a room!"

"We did. And we'd better get there pretty quick, or my new girlfriend is going to go up in smoke like that little prick."

"Horrible thought. Dr. Trudeau." Sinclair nodded at her, and she stood beside the booth and bowed back. Liam slid out behind her. "Liam." Since he wasn't a subject, the king shook his hand. "Thank you again."

"It was nice meeting you," Betsy said, shaking their hands. Sophie started to bow to her, then thought better of it (the warning glare was a tip-off). "Thanks for figuring it out, tracking down the bad guy, and killing him. I'm trying to figure out what you needed us for," she joked.

"It's nice to make new friends, if nothing else," she replied, smiling shyly at the queen. "I've been alone for a while, but it was by choice... a poor one, I'm thinking now."

"Yeah, well, nice to meet you, too."

Sophie was looking at the new queen with a thoughtful expression. "I avoided this area when Nostro was in power, but now things seem very different. I'd like to stay in touch."



"Nothing would please us more," Sinclair said. "Good night."

"One more thing," Liam said, as he and Sophie went back out to the truck. "Since I'm telling you all the deep dark secrets I've been keeping, I've got another one."

"Yes?"

"I hate cats."

She laughed. "Be serious."

"Sophie. I hate 'em. That's why I don't have any."

"You have a dozen!"

"Well, they aren't mine. I just feed them and look after them."

"I thought you loved cats," she said, confused. "You're always bringing them to me and—oh."

"Yeah."

"Oh!"

"Uh-huh. You know, you're not as smart as you think you are."

"I guess not," she admitted, and laughed, and kissed him.
