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# **The Incredible Misadventures of Boo and the Boy Blunder**

***FROM KICK ASS ANTHOLOGY***

**By**

**MaryJanice Davidson**

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*For Jessica Growette,  
who takes time away from her job  
and family to help my books do well.*

## **Acknowledgments**

Thanks as always to Cindy Hwang, for asking, and to my husband, for doing.

## Author's Note

There are vampire hunters, and there are albinos, but usually they aren't one and the same.

"Friends are *such* a mixed blessing."

—Berkeley Breathed

## PROLOGUE



Although she hadn't been in his bar for five months and eighteen days, Jim knew her the minute she walked in. He would have known her anywhere, any place. She looked exactly the same, though she had been coming to Doule's, on and off, for ten years.

Shoulder-length white hair. Not blond... *white*. Skin like milk. Eyes so pale a blue she looked blind... or like she had seen too much, and it had burned away all the trivialities in her.

Full mouth, long neck, and *real* long legs... he was six foot three and only had a couple of inches on her. High tits, firm and not too big. She was dressed in dark colors—she always dressed that way, as if to emphasize her striking coloring. Black jeans, a black T-shirt, black boots. Shit-kicker boots.

She sat down at the bar—though it was Friday night, a seat had instantly emptied for her—and nodded at him. He nodded back and had her drink—a Black Russian—in front of her a few seconds later.

She grunted her thanks and bent to her reading material. She was reading the obituary section of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. He had never seen her read anything else, although they were in Boston.

It was just one more mystery about her. He didn't know her real name—everyone called her Ghost. But never to her face. He didn't know where she



lived, but he suspected the Twin Cities; when she occasionally spoke, she didn't drop her r's and sounded, to his born-and-bred Weymouth ears, a little flat. He didn't know how old she was—her face was perfectly unlined; she could have been twenty-five or fifty-five.

He'd never seen her driver's license; it wasn't that kind of bar. If you were tough enough to get through the door, you could drink whatever the hell you wanted. And if you wanted to pay cash and leave without a receipt, that was fine, too.

He knew she was mesmerizing, stunning. And tough. Her job

*(bounty hunter?)*

took her to the area several times a year. Once

*(FBI profiler?)*

she'd come in without her jacket, wearing a black tank, and he'd noticed the muscle definition in her arms.

*(traveling lumberjack?)*

Sleek and pale and hard, like marble.

He knew she drank Black Russians and never had more than two an evening. He knew she occasionally carried a Beretta in a shoulder holster and her purse was full of spare clips. She always tipped 20 percent, and she never showed up two nights in a row.

He supposed he had a crush on her, a fragile one. It was a crush that wouldn't hold up under reality. She was probably in pharmaceutical sales and got the muscles working out in a health club like a gerbil on a wheel.

She was probably a perfectly ordinary person. The regulars let her through because she had a stony beauty, not because she was tough. And she probably read a Minnesota paper because she had a boyfriend there, or something boring

like that.

He didn't especially care. He enjoyed seeing her the few times a year, and wondering. He'd never ask, she'd never tell, and things worked fine.

## CH@%!\*R 1



Boo Miller had just settled on her favorite stool in her favorite bar in her favorite city when she saw the tourist come in.

Tourist. When you hung out in places like Doule's, a tourist was defined simply as someone who did not belong. Doule's was a place for disgraced cops, con men (and women), thieves, parolees, and telemarketers. Not clean-cut boys slumming before going back to the Financial District first thing Monday.

That was okay. He wasn't just a tourist now; he was bait. It would make her job a helluva lot easier. And she had to give the boy toy snaps for even getting out of his car in this neighborhood, never mind coming inside.

"Excuse me," he was saying to Jim, the barkeep. Jim was typical of his clientele: Instead of a barbed wire tattoo around his biceps, he wore actual barbed wire. His nose had been broken at least twice, and he kept a twelve-gauge shotgun beneath the bar. Everyone knew it was there (well, everyone but the boy toy), and everyone knew Jim wouldn't hesitate to use it. Slugs would bring down a grown man just as easily as they'd take a ten-point buck. That's why *everyone* got along so well.

"What?" Jim asked, no inflection in the word at all.

"My cell's dead, and I've got a flat... do you mind if I use your phone?"

Boo shook her head without looking up.

"Pay phone's out back," Jim said.

"Oh." The bait seemed a little surprised, then resigned. "Well, okay. Sorry to bother you." Boy toy practically tiptoed through the filth on the floor (a stimulating combination of flat beer, piss, and mop water), and headed toward the back.

And the vampire got up to follow him.

Boo knew he'd do it. He couldn't help it, any more than a starving dog couldn't help stuffing itself and then puking. Bad neighborhood, clean-cut victim, a back ally behind a bar where the patrons wouldn't ask questions, or even look up—the boy toy might as well have written his blood type on his forehead.

After a minute, she went out after them.

## CH@%!\*R 2



It wasn't the worst night of Eddie Batley's life (his father's funeral still held the top spot), but it was close. First, his supervisor had busted him on all the surfing. The IT department had ratted him out, buncha spying brownshirts. "*Jawhol, Human Resources! Vee haff caught zee spy!*" He was amazed that they had nothing better to do... then remembered they really didn't. Making sure nobody had any fun at work was literally what they were paid for.

Then he'd had to work late, to make up for the time spent surfing. Then he'd left his cell phone in the car but hadn't plugged it in, so the battery conked out. Then he'd headed over to his ex-girlfriend's place to put in a cameo for her engagement party, had stupidly taken a shortcut, and blown a tire in quite possibly the worst neighborhood in the state.

His own fault... in Boston, it was prudent to stick to the path. Shortcuts were a bad idea, especially in a town where to create streets they'd simply paved the cow paths and called it good.

Now he was being mugged. Mugged! He felt like Comic Book Guy in *The Simpsons*: Worst. Episode. Ever!

Eddie wasn't especially big, and he wasn't especially strong—he led a sedentary life. But the mugger had muscles on muscles, because Eddie actually felt his feet leave the ground as the mugger pulled him close. Kissing close, as a matter of fact. As a further matter of fact, Eddie didn't swing that way. As a final matter of

fact, the mugger wasn't going anywhere near his wallet. He was—uh—was he—  
"Ow!" Eddie yelled. Worst *mugging* ever! The guy had *bitten* him on the *neck*,  
like some kind of—of—

Then the mugger dropped him, and just when Eddie was ready to ask him what  
the hell he thought he was doing, the mugger fell down dead with a big stick  
poking through his shirt.

That's when Eddie saw the mongo-babe who'd been in the bar earlier. She was  
standing right behind where the mugger had been.

He'd never heard her come up behind them.

"What the *hell is* going on?" he yelled.

"Go home," mongo-babe said, poking the mugger with the toe of her boot.

## CH@%!\*R 3



"Wait wait wait. This is... a vampire, right?"

"Was," the babe said. She bent, pulled out the stick—stake, rather—and it slid out with sickening ease. "Past tense."

"And you're a vampire slayer."

" 'Bye," she said, whipping a wetnap pack out of her purse—ubiquitous in any woman's purse, with all the steamed lobster in town—tearing it, pulling out the nap, and wiping the blood off the end of the stake.

"Holy shit!" He was officially freaking out. Was he? Yep, he was. "I can't believe it! They're real! *You're* real."

The supercool vampire slayer grunted. Not much for conversation, but then, when you were heart-stoppingly gorgeous, he supposed you didn't have to be. He'd never seen a woman with such striking coloring before—her hair was silvery white, and so were her eyebrows. Her skin was almost as light as her hair. In the poor light of the alley, she almost seemed to glow. She looked like a beautiful ghost.

"Thanks for saving me from the fiendish clutch of the undead," he said, dazzled. She grunted again, put the stake in her handbag, bent, and pulled a ring off the dead vampire's left thumb. Then she turned to leave.

"Wait!" He grabbed her elbow without thinking, then dropped it when she turned

back and gave him her full attention. Her terrifying, knee-weakening attention. Her eyes were pale, and oddly mesmerizing. He hadn't been afraid of the vampire—everything had happened so fast, and being bitten was more annoying than scary—but he was afraid of her. *The vampire never heard her, never saw her*, he remembered. *Never knew what hit him*. "Uh, you're leaving?"

"Yeah."

"Well..." His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat and added manfully, "I'm coming with you."

Alarm flashed across her cold features. "No, no." She sounded... was it possible? Nervous?

"Listen, you saved my life. You *changed* my life!"

"It's only been," she said, "sixteen seconds."

"Right, but I can't believe it's all true! Vampires and vampire slayers, and—what else? Werewolves? Fairies? Trolls? Goblins?"

"Yes, yes, no, no, no, no. It's not that interesting," she said, which didn't convince him in the slightest. "It's just a job."

"No," he replied, "I have just a job. You—you're living a legend. You're like Buffy! Or Faith. Maybe Faith—you're kind of terrifying. But I've got to come with you now. Besides..." He groped for something that would appeal to her warrior's honor. "You saved my life, and that's a debt I have to repay."

"What bullshit," she said, and turned away.

"I'll follow you!" he yelled after her. From the other side of the street, dogs started to yowl. Well, his voice *did* get kind of high when he was excited. "It'll be hard for you to sneak up on vampires with following your footsteps like—like a Watson to your Holmes."



She turned back and rolled her eyes. "This isn't a TV show or a movie or even a book," she told him. "Real life is different. It's messy. It's hard to find a parking spot, and when you're on stake-but it's hard to find a place to take a shit."

"I know real life is different," he said, stung. And, frankly, a little disillusioned. Vampire slayers needed to take shits? "You don't have to tell me that. I'm not some dorky teenager." Hell, he'd been legal drinking age for five months and sixteen days!

"Yeah?" She was eyeing him in a way he wasn't entirely sure was complimentary. He looked down at himself, at his LUKE I AM YOUR FATHER T-shirt and the navy blue HE'S DEAD JIM computer bag, "I'm not sure you do."

"I can help," he said. "I want to help you. You saved my life, I've got to pay you back. Come on, I'll bet you could use an assistant."

"I don't even live around here," she said, looking more alarmed by the second.

"Great! I'm ready for a change of scenery." He was determined to tag along with the goddess of stakehood for as long as he could. This was the way out of his mediocre life. She was right, things *were* different in the real world. For one thing, they were massively boring. All the things he had long suspected as a kid—vampires, slayers, the fantastic and strange and wonderful—were true! He'd been a fool to ever believe otherwise. The question was, what else was out there?

*The truth is out there*, he thought, having a total Mulder moment. Oh, yeah!

"This isn't something you can wrap up with a few pop culture references."

"I bet you could use a guy like me," he insisted.

"A guy like you?"

"Yeah. I look like everybody else. Five minutes after I leave a room, nobody remembers I was there." The thing he had hated... could it be his secret power?

Tonight, anything was possible. "But you... everybody remembers you, I bet."

She actually looked like she was mulling that one over. He pressed his advantage. "I can go into places for you and—be bait! Like I was tonight."

"You mean, be a dumbass on purpose?"

"Whatever it takes," he said doggedly. "Make your job a lot easier."

"Well..."

She was weakening!

"Great!"

"I haven't agreed yet."

"As good as." He had her! He had worn her down with the same über-geekiness that had scored him a date with his gaming partner for the prom. Maybe *that* was his power. The wear-down.

"You help me catch this one vampire," she told him. "This *one*. And then you go back to your life, and I go back to mine. No following me, no bugging me, no geeking out on me, no talking to me, no looking at me, no anything, ever.

Agreed?"

"Don't worry. I'll help you catch the next one, and then you won't have to worry about trying to lose me."

"I'm not worried about trying to lose you," she told him. "I'd rather not kill you."

"Uh... what?"

"I only kill the dead," she said. "Come on, Boy Blunder."

## CH@%!\*R 4



*How do I get myself into this shit?* Boo asked herself as her new sidekick—sidekick!—gabbled happily beside her. *Because I'm a fuckin' softie and people smell it the way a vampire smells fear. That's how.*

"So, where's this new vampire we're going to kill? Is it close by? Do we have to get on a plane? Do you have a super-secret vampire killer plane? You know, like Wonder Woman's invisible jet?"

"Stop talking."

"What's your power? Do you have ghost powers? Or just, you know, strength and speed and stuff?"

"Stop talking now."

"I bet it's ghost powers. I never even heard you come up behind us. Can you walk through walls, too?"

She seized his shirt collar, twisted, and pulled him toward her until their faces were an inch apart. His brown eyes blinked at her from behind his wire rims.

"Ghost powers? *Ghost* powers? What planet do you live on?"

"Hey, if you don't want to talk about your super-secret ghost powers, I understand."

She ground her teeth as an alternative to breaking his nose. "I don't. Have. Ghost. Powers."

"Okay, okay. Wh-what's your name?"

*Shit.* "Boo."

"Your name is Boo?"

"Listen carefully. I'm not telling you again. This isn't a comic book. I don't have any powers. The average person—that's you, dipshit—is so fucking unobservant, it makes it easy for me to off vampires. I look like I do because I'm a genetic *freak*, not because I have—Jesus!—ghost powers."

"Are you sure you're not super strong? Because my feet are practically off the ground, here. For the second time in ten minutes, I might add."

She let him go, disgusted with him and herself. "Come on, dickwad. Let's get this over with, so you can go back to your chat rooms."

"Sure." He pushed his glasses up and jerked his head, tossing a lock of brown hair out of his eyes. "But if it's okay with you, I don't want my sidekick handle to be dickwad. Or dipshit."

"Pick up the pace, fuckstick."

"Okay, well, I don't much care for that one, either." She could hear him hurrying after her. "How about Mack? I've always liked Mack."

"How about shut up?" Ah! Finally. She put her fingers between her teeth and whistled, a piercing note that cut through the night like a straight razor. "Taxi!"

"Ow! Is that your power? I bet that does a number on a dog's ears."

She sighed and jerked the door open. "Milk Street," she told the driver, then got in the front seat. Damned if she was sitting in the back with her own personal nightmare. "Get in, shitheap."

"Bad guys, here we come!" he yelled, and she fought the urge to groan and cover her eyes.

"By the way, my name's Eddie."

"I don't care."

"Eddie Batley," he continued, as if she'd said something else.

"Shut up and drink your kiddie cocktail, Eddie."

"It's a Shirley Temple," he snapped, and slurped it moodily. "You're the grumpiest vampire slayer I've ever met."

"Bad news."

"Actually, you're the *only*—what? Are we outnumbered by the denizens of the undead? Are their ghoulish minions cutting us off from aid?"

*I only kill the dead. I only kill the dead. I only*—"I don't see him."

"And that's bad because... ?"

"I have to keep sitting here with you."

"Aw," he said, still slurping. "That just means we can get to know each other better. Which did you like best, *Attack of the Clones* or *Phantom Menace*? Have you seen *Revenge of the Sith* yet?"

She motioned for the waitress to come over to their little table in the back.

"Bring me three more of these."

"You got it, hon."

"And don't spare the booze," she muttered.

"So, Boo. That's kind of a weird name, you've gotta admit."

"I admit nothing."

"Is that a nickname, or is it short for something?"

"Shut up."

"At least it's not Casper or Ghost Girl or something like that. Boo's kind of cute."

"I'm going to let this vampire kill you," she informed him. "I'm not saving you this time. I'm never saving you again."

"You would betray your oath as a slayer?"

"What *oath*, nimrod? Guy asked me to take out the sucker at Doule's, same guy asked me to axe the sucker here, half in advance, the rest upon completion, thanks very much, have a nice fuckin' day."

"So you're like—like a paid assassin of the vampire?"

"Yeah."

"A vampire slayer!" he finished triumphantly.

"*No*. You make it sound like some romantic, amazing, incredible thing. It's just how I make a buck."

"A lonely calling, to be sure."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Her Black Russians arrived and she gulped thirstily at the first one.

"So, what's that?"

"Shut up."

"Beer? Is it really dark beer?"

She groaned inwardly. "It's a Black Russian."

"Huh. So you drink Black Russians, you're wearing black boots and jeans, and a black shirt, and your purse is black—that's the biggest purse I've ever seen, by the way—and your hair is white and—huh."

"Yeah, it's all a bigass mystery, huh, Dorkson?"

"It's Watson, and you don't have to be so sensitive about it. I mean, you're really

beautiful. The guys in here can't take their eyes off you."

"Super."

"If I had something like that—"

"Something like *what*, schmucko?"

"Well, you know. You're an albino, right? It sets you apart. If I was like you, I'd be—"

"You'd be what, Boy Blunder?"

"Happy."

"Eddie: Do I *look* happy?"

"Well, no. Frankly, I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

"Drink your cocktail, Babbly."

"It's Batley," he corrected her.

"You've heard the phrase I couldn't care less? I really, really, really couldn't."

A blessed beat of silence, broken by his, "So, if you could be Han Solo or Luke, which would you pick?"

"Batley, will you *shut up*?"

"I knew you'd get my name right eventually," he said smugly, and slurped down his maraschino cherry.

## CH@%!\*R 5



"This has been the greatest night of my life," her sidekick declared an hour later.

"Really? I was just thinking about how it was never going to end." Boo said this to her arms, since she had long ago put her head down and feigned sleep in a futile attempt to get him to stop talking.

"I can't believe they didn't even card me! I get carded for buying plant food."

"Nuh."

"So who is this guy? That you're going to slay? On a badass scale of one to ten, with one being my grandpa and a ten being Darth Vader—"

"Six."

"Huh. How about the one you already—"

"Four."

"He seemed pretty bad to me. Just walked up and grabbed me and chomped, without asking or even saying hi."

"That's a garden variety vampire. They're all like that."

"All of them? Aren't there any good ones like Angel, or season seven Spike?"

"No, numb fuck," she said kindly. "Vampires have to drink our blood to survive, they're pissed about being dead, and they never, ever say please. The one who got you was on my list because he *also* liked to cut up male strippers and leave the pieces scattered around the local playground."



"Gah!" he gahed. "That's disgusting!"

Boo shrugged. "Well. He's dead now, B.B."

"He was a *four*?"

"Yeah."

"Wh—what about the guy we're after now? The six?"

"Well. Um..."

"Oh my God! You're hesitating! You *never* hesitate. He's the Hitler of vampires, isn't he? He's sneaking up behind me right now, isn't he?" B.B. looked around wildly and accidentally knocked over his empty glass.

"Calm down before you hurt yourself. The vamp I'm supposed to kill—I haven't exactly got the job yet."

"You *don't*?"

"Killing the vampire earlier was kind of like... a tryout. The guy who hired me is meeting us here tonight to get proof that I did the first job, and he'll decide whether or not to send me after the other one."

"Huh. Cautious guy."

Exactly. She kind of liked her faceless employer for it. She was consumed with curiosity, and couldn't wait to meet him.

"That's why you took the ring?"

"No, it was shiny, and I wanted it, dumbass."

"I like B.B. better. I'm gonna pretend it stands for Brave—uh... what's another cool word that starts with B?"

"Boring," she suggested.

"Listen, *Boo*, I—"

"No."

"What, no?"

"You don't get to call me by my first name."

"What am I supposed to call you?"

"Why don't you go away and think about it?"

"Oh no you don't. I'm not missing all the fun."

"Yeah, we're having tons of fun tonight." She yawned. "Maybe the vampire will liven things up. He could hardly make things worse."

"Vampire? Where?" Another empty glass went flying. "Oh my God, is he behind me? He is, isn't he? I can feel his unholy cold breath on the back of my neck!"

"No, dumbass," she said kindly. "The wall's behind you. The vampire's standing just to the left of the stage. Denim shirt, khakis, necktie."

Eddie squinted. "Soulless bloodsuckers wear khakis?"

"Sure."

"Is it the one we're supposed to kill?"

"No." And that was odd. She could go weeks without seeing a vampire, except through work. It was an interesting coincidence that she had killed one earlier, was setting up to kill another, and here was a third.

Big surprise, the vampire was ferociously good-looking. Boo was used to that; in all her sixteen years of killing the dead, she had yet to stake one that was even plain. It wasn't such a mystery when you thought about it. All vampires were by definition murder victims. And everybody liked their food to be pleasantly presented. It was why they served pheasants under glass, and sushi with fake grass.

This one was no different—tall and broad shouldered, about six foot three. Dark

blond hair pulled back in a ponytail that stopped between his shoulder blades. And even across the darkened club she could see how blue his eyes were. Long, straight nose and the *de rigueur* full mouth, which, she had no doubt, hid a mouthful of fangs when he was hungry.

The Boy Blunder was gripping the table while he stared. "What's he doing?"

"Probably looking for a drink."

"You mean a victim."

"Sure. Most vampires have to drink every night. He's scoping for singles. Someone who looks lonely or upset—stood up, or abandoned. They're like hyenas, B.B. They don't go for groups. They cull from the herd."

"Oh my God! He's going up on stage! He's—he's going after the stage manager!"

"No..." She stared with dawning horror. "He's... he's..."

B.B. glanced at the sign over the bar. "The Tickler. I thought this was some sort of weird sex bar, but it's—"

"A comedy club," she finished, and rested her forehead on her arms again.

"...and what's the deal with coffins? Have you ever tried to sleep in one? They're the worst! Hard—no support for your lower back, and pointy at the end, so your feet can't even breathe. It doesn't matter how many Dr. Scholl's you put on; your feet just smother in those things.

"I mean, it's bad enough you die and find out nobody remembered to put your funeral into their Palm, but then you've got to give up your Select Comfort Bed for *this*?"

Gregory Schorr barely heard the laughter—not that he ever got the big belly roars of a Robin Williams or Jim Carrey—because he couldn't take his eyes off Ghost. Unbelievable! The most feared vampire killer of the last hundred years

was sitting twenty feet away. Listening to his routine! She had a look on her perfect, white face that he couldn't read... she could have been bored or anxious.

"And let me tell you something else about being dead," he continued, on automatic, the better to stare at the Ghost. "You still have to put quarters in the meter. Hell, for that matter you still have to find a parking place! Try finding that little detail in Anne Rice's latest." She was stunning, utterly breathtaking. Slim, with that unearthly pale skin—she was paler than he was!—and riveting light-colored eyes. Her hair looked like white silk, and he longed to touch it, to run it through his fingers, see it spread out on his pillow.

He had been dying to meet her—almost literally—for the last decade, but the gossip and rumors simply did not do her justice. She was breathtaking. She had killed more vampires than he had ever seen but, having little love for his kind, that just made her more appealing.

He finished his routine, accepted the modest applause—he was learning not to hypnotize the audience into laughing, and paying for it with less overt clapping—and practically ran over to her table.

"Look out!" her companion, a dark-haired, bespectacled youngster, warned.

"Here he comes!"

"Thanks for the heads-up," she told him. To Gregory, she said, "That was—uh—well."

"You're hired," he said.

## CH@%!\*R 6



"You can't hire me," Boo told the vampire, who, amazingly, had pulled up a chair and was sitting two feet away.

"Excuse me, but I just did."

"I don't work for dead guys."

"What do you think you've been doing?"

Her eyes widened and almost bulged, and Eddie happened to know there was a gun in the small of her back and three stakes in her purse, so he jumped in. "So, you're a comedian?"

The vampire looked away from her, at him, and Eddie squashed the instant urge to leap from his chair and exit the building. Boo had explained that the way to spot a vampire was to look for the ones who couldn't join a crowd. The ones on the fringe, looking on. Pale, and quick—unbelievably quick. With mesmerizing charisma—the ones you wanted to follow all the way home. Or to a car. Or a hotel room. Or an alley. A stranger you were instantly drawn to, and trusted. And feared.

Eddie was afraid of the vampire, but wanted to stay and listen as much as he wanted to leave. And that scared him worse than anything that had happened all night.

"Yeah, amateur," the vampire said. Eddie wasn't sure if he was referring to

himself, or Eddie. "What'd you think?"

"It was... interesting." To put it mildly. A vampire riffing on vampires. Huh. He'd been afraid Boo would swallow her own tongue. She hadn't been that appalled when he'd tagged along for the night. "So this is what you do?"

"Sure. In my old life I was a cop, but I swore if I ever got a second chance, I'd try stand-up. Just for fun, a part-time thing. So after I came back from the dead —"

"You didn't come back from the dead," Boo interrupted. She looked rattled. Frankly, he didn't think she could *get* rattled. "You *are* dead."

"Semantics," the vampire said easily, and smiled at them both.

"You have a great smile," Eddie said, dazzled. Not that he swung that way (not that there was anything wrong with that) but the vampire seemed genuinely nice. Charming and, like, urbane. It was kind of—

"We're out of here," Boo announced, standing. "Let's book, B.B."

The vampire put a hand on her arm. "Don't you want to—"

"I *want* you to let go of me before something felonious happens to you."

He let go. Eddie nearly shriveled with relief. "Look, let's all sit down and have a drink."

Boo gave him a look that nearly scorched his eyebrows. "I don't drink with the dead."

"No," the vampire said cheerfully, "you just get hired by them. You pretty much do their bidding. You don't think I'm the first one to ever think of it, do you?"

She sat so hard, the chair rocked. "What."

The vampire clicked his fingers at the waitress. "Another round, please."

"Sure, Greg," the bodaciously cute woman with purple curls replied, giving him

a smile and switching her butt as she walked away.

"*What.*"

"Is that supposed to be a question? I'd heard your social skills were fairly poor, but I like to judge for myself before—ow."

"Ow?" Eddie asked. He'd heard an odd sound—zing!—but couldn't place it. Then he saw the vampire look under the table, put his hand down—on his leg, maybe?—and bring it back up, dripping blood. "Oh my God! You *shot* him?"

"I shot him."

"That wasn't nice," the vampire said reproachfully. "That's my favorite shin. Not to mention, all my other slacks are at the dry cleaners."

"I don't get some answers quick, I'll be a lot less nice and your dry cleaner will be a lot more busy."

Eddie's mind reeled. "Ack! Dude, tell her what she wants to know! And put the gun away," he hissed at Boo. "We're not in the *Star Wars* cantina."

"Oh, God, if only." She saw the vampire flinch and smiled. It wasn't an especially warm smile. "Oops. My bad."

"What do you want to know?" he asked reasonably, reaching for a napkin and wiping the blood off his hand. Eddie noticed it was very dark blood, and that the vampire didn't bother to use any napkins to blot his leg. Could they heal that quickly? And why wasn't he screaming and jumping up and down? Did they not feel pain?

"Why did you hire me?"

"To kill vampires. Two unbelievably awful ones, in fact."

"But—you're a vampire," Eddie couldn't help pointing out. "You can't—I mean, you guys are supposed to stick together."

"Why?" the vampire replied. "You guys don't. Besides, I used to be a cop. There's some stuff you just can't look away from. Ghost can do the job, so I hired her."

*"Don't shoot him again!"* Eddie screamed in a whisper.

"I don't like that name," Boo told the undead, soon-to-be-all-the-way dead guy. For the first time all evening, the vampire looked mortified. "Right. Sorry about that. What shall I call you?"

"Shut up."

"All right, but doesn't have a very nice ring to—"

"What did you mean when you said you weren't the first one to think of it?" she interrupted.

"Well, what does it sound like? Vampires are territorial. Sometimes we don't get along too well. Luckily, there's a famous vampire killer who happens to be for hire, and she doesn't check ID. She just takes the cash and does the job. What could be simpler?"

Boo went paler, a feat Eddie didn't think was possible. It was obvious this had never occurred to her before. It wouldn't have occurred to him, either. Vampires hiring vampire slayers to kill vampires? Yech. Chilly bastards.

"It's the way of the world," the vampire was saying, sounding concerned. "I thought you knew."

"Of course she knew," Eddie interrupted, too heartily. "You think there's something you bloodsuckers are up to that we don't have the 4-1-1 on? Ha! And again, I say ha."

"Well, good, I'd hate to think I took the intrepid vampire killers by surprise." The waitress came back, put down drinks—the vampire was drinking something dark



red in a wineglass, surprise—and gave them all a nice flash of cleavage as she took her tip. "So! I take it you've killed that asshole, Weatherly?"

There was a 'clunk!' as Boo dropped the dead (?) vampire's ring on their little table.

"Nice," the vampire said, picking it up and looking at it. "Just outstanding. How'd he go?"

"He went easy."

"Yeah," Eddie said, sounding, to his own ears, tough and cool, if slightly squeaky. "Piece of cake."

"Really?" The vampire's gaze lingered on Eddie's neck, and he couldn't help fingering the bite mark, which still stung. "That's good. Only one to go."

"I can't work for you," Boo said, looking like a grasshopper was crawling around inside her mouth.

"You'll let Martigan walk around free?"

"Martigan would be..." Eddie prompted.

"A real piece of work," the vampire said, sounding disgusted. And what would disgust a guy who routinely drank blood, Eddie had no idea. But he suspected he was about to find out. "As far as I can figure, he's been around since the thirties. Likes to eat children. He'll stay in one place, a bunch of kids will disappear, but before the mob can get pitchforks and torches—or even an Identi-Kit—together, he disappears. Then he'll pop up somewhere new, and in a few days, there's more third graders missing."

"That's horrible," Eddie said, feeling faint. As a mostly grown man it had been one thing to face off against a vampire. But a child? "That's—"

"But he fucked up. He's in my territory now. And we're gonna get him." The

vampire smiled, looking wolfish and cheerful at the same time.

"We?" Boo said, and Eddie could have sworn her expression had eased a little. Aw. She and the vampire had something in common... their hatred of scumball vampires. It was all right out of... well, he wasn't sure what.

"He's too dangerous, too old. I can't in good conscience let you go after him by yourselves. Especially with a child who has no idea what he's doing."

"Hey!" Eddie said hotly. "I'm not a child, I'm twenty-one!"

The vampire rolled his eyes, and the corner of Boo's mouth twitched.

"I'm an intrepid vampire killer, deadly apprentice to the most feared and—and blond vampire killer of them all!"

"Oh, stop it," the vampire told him. "You've never even met one before tonight, I'll bet my watch on it. You're probably tagging along because you think it'll be interesting and fun. And the lady here is too nice to tell you to flick off."

"Heh," Boo said.

"But *I'm* not," the vampire said. He leaned forward, and Eddie suddenly noticed how huge the man's pupils were, blotting out the blue of his eyes, blotting out the room, the world. "Fuck off."

## CH@%!\*R 7



"I'm not working with you," Boo said, watching Eddie get up and walk away like a robot. "Although, uh, thanks."

"Really, what were you thinking?" Gregory scolded her. "I can't think of a better way for an ordinary fellow to get hurt than to spend the night hanging out with you."

"I would have looked out for him. Off my case, dead guy," she snapped.

"We'll let that pass for the minute. And would you rather go after Martigan by yourself and possibly fail, or let me come along and increase your chances of success?"

"Mmmm..."

"Not that you would be 'letting' me do anything," he added silkily.

"You're really pushing your luck, dead guy."

"Maybe you could stake me after," he added helpfully, and she almost laughed.

In fact, this was the most intriguing vampire she had ever met. Not that she'd ever spent much time getting to know the dead. But Gregory Schorr was an interesting mix of hard and compassionate.

Kind of the way she thought of herself, truth be told.

"That's an interesting proposition," she admitted. "And you *did* get rid of the Boy Blunder for me."

He'd been sipping his wine, and choked. "That's what you call him?"

"One of the things." She finished her last Black Russian, then shook her head.

"No, I can't. I should be killing you right this second."

"Please," he said, offended. "You've already ruined my pants. That reminds me, I've got a locker in the back of the club—I'll have to change."

"Never mind about your pants. I should stake you, then go after Martigan. He won't be the only awful vampire I've ever killed."

"No, but he'll be the oldest."

She was silent. He was right. How did he know that?

"We have a newsletter," he told her, anticipating the question.

"You *what*?"

"All right, we don't. But there are files on you in the library in Minneapolis. There's not much, but you *have* left witnesses, unwittingly or not. I've sort of been a fan."

"That's gross."

"Fine, play hard to get."

"I'm *not*—"

"Anyway, you do what I do. You get rid of the scum, the creatures you absolutely can't abide walking around on the same planet you are. Listen, when I was a cop, I had the highest clearing rate in the city. I wasn't about to let being a vampire change that. Put yourself in my shoes: You've got fifteen years of BPD experience, and suddenly you're a lot harder to kill. What would you do?"

"What all of you do," she replied in a hard voice. "Make victims. Every night."

He made an impatient sound. "Yes, I drink blood, I take victims just about every night. You're telling me you're a defender of rapists, of murderers? Because

that's who I drink from."

She sat in silence. She was a lot of things, but she wasn't a hypocrite. She wasn't about to ride his ass because he ate bad guys. If you thought about it, he was doing a public service.

She shook that off. Sitting here in the gloom with him, *not* killing him, *did* make her a hypocrite. All vampires were bad. Gregory was a vampire. Gregory was bad. Simplistic but then, the basics always were.

"It's just a job," he reminded her gently. "Don't you want to stack the deck as far as you can in your favor? There's plenty of time to worry about other things after we—after you take care of Martigan."

In the end, that was the straw she grasped: the job. She had been telling herself for years that killing vampires was just how she made a buck. If Gregory could help her do her job, she was a fool to stand in his way.

And there would be time to worry about other things. Later.

## CH@%!\*R 8



Gregory worked hard to contain his elation. If the darling Ghost had the tiniest hint how thrilled he was to be spending the night with her, she'd likely shoot him again. Worse, she'd leave.

"I suppose we'd better get B.B.," she observed as they left the club and went into the autumn Boston evening. "Not that I don't appreciate you getting rid of him. But I'd feel better if I saw him safely home. Otherwise he'll just—"

"Wander around, fucking off," Gregory confirmed. "Not to tell you your business —"

"So don't."

"But what were you thinking, letting him tag along?"

"He caught me in a weak moment," she admitted. "Not to mention, I was sort of impressed. Most people in that situation would have pissed themselves with fear, then cried themselves to sleep. He wanted to tag along and help me."

"Can't blame him for that one," Gregory murmured.

She gave him a sideways look, one without the slightest drop of flirtation. "Don't start the whole vampire seduction bullshit, unless you like the taste of wood."

"Wanting to seduce you has nothing to do with my being a vampire," he told her.

"Right." She managed to cram an amazing amount of disgust and disbelief into one word.

"Is this the part where you pretend that you have no idea you're fantastically beautiful?" he asked politely.

Her lips went so tight they almost disappeared. "No, it's the part where I kill you and then sit down to a chicken dinner."

"After we get Eddie," he reminded her, cheering up, as always, at the prospect of distracting death. Not to mention possibly buying death a drink.

They found Eddie stumbling around along the waterfront, more vacant-eyed than usual. The vampire, Boo noticed, didn't look remotely ashamed at the state he'd left Eddie in.

"You're coming with us, looks like," he said, snapping his fingers before Eddie's eyes.

"Whoa!" Eddie shook himself like a Labrador fresh out of a lake. "I am? Great. Okay! Great. That was weird. Man, you totally Jedi'd all over my butt."

"Yeah, sorry ab—"

"That was awesome! You used your dark powers of the night on me."

"I'm going to use my dark powers of my foot up your ass if we don't get going," Boo said, possibly more irritated than she'd ever been in her life. "Let's go, Boy Blunder."

"I really hate that name," Eddie confided, falling into step beside her. "So what's the plan?"

"What *is* the plan?" Gregory asked, behind her. He could see at once she didn't care for that at all, as she immediately slowed so he could walk abreast. It was a little disconcerting, but he couldn't blame her for being practical.

"You're asking me?" she replied. "You're the incredibly ancient wise old creature of the night."

"I'm only sixty-eight," he said, irritated. He had no idea how old the lady was, but chances were he had a decade or two on her at least.

"Well, you don't look a second over twenty-eight," Eddie comforted him. "In fact, you're a great-looking guy. Not great looking for your age; great looking in general. I mean, I'm strictly hetero, but I have to say, if I ever made an exception to the rule, I'd definitely do it for you."

"That's adorable," Boo said. "I think you two make a great couple. I foresee a spring wedding."

"It's possible I haven't entirely shaken off your little Jedi trick," Eddie admitted.

"I'm *sure* that's not it," Boo said, actually grinning a little. Gregory was torn between exasperation at the Boy Blunder and happiness that she was smiling.

"You were telling us the plan."

"Was I? Well, my plan was to meet you, get the green light to axe Martigan, then go find Martigan and axe him. But it's turning into one of those nights," she finished in a mutter.



## CH@%!\*R 9



"You know, you don't have to stick around," Boo said. Bad enough she had one sidekick she didn't know what to do with, but now a vampire was tagging along. A damned vampire!

*It serves me right, she thought, sighing internally. I earned every bit of it. It's mine. I shouldn't have put Blunder out there for bait, and this is my punishment: The guy I thought I was supposed to kill is sticking to me like gum on a shoe.*

"You can't take Martigan by yourself," he reminded her.

"Says you. Besides, what do you care?"

"Hey, I'm still a cop."

"No you aren't!" she almost shouted. "You're dead, you've been dead for years, and dead guys make lousy policemen."

"In my heart, I'm still a cop." And he said it so sincerely, she couldn't think of a retort.

"So you hired her to kill this vampire," Eddie piped up, "this Martigan guy?"

"Sure."

"How'd you even know how to find her? How'd you even know about Martigan?"

She opened her mouth to say something like "Shut up, Boy Asunder," but she was curious about those points herself, and wanted to hear Gregory's answer.

Gregory had his hands stuffed in his pocket, past the wrists, and kicked at a rock

while they walked together. "I run my own security company."

"Like private cops."

"Yes."

"Cool."

"We can always use another Web geek," Gregory said, and Boo could practically hear Eddie getting the thrill of his life.

"Really? You'll give me a job? Because the one I have *sucks*. No offense. If that term offends you. And I hope it doesn't."

"You can't work for him," she said, exasperated.

"*You do.*"

"That's just for tonight," she snapped. "And I'm an independent contractor, not an employee."

"Well, you can't spend your whole life slaying vampires," Eddie said. "Can you?"

She found that honestly puzzling. "What else would I do?"

"Lots of things. With your God-given powers of light, and his fiendish powers of the night—"

"Eddie, you're so completely full of shit."

"Not completely," Gregory said.

"Yes, completely. The very idea is beyond ridiculous."

"We'd make a great team," the vampire said, actually sounding wounded.

"Yeah, we would," Boy Hinder enthused.

*God, God.* "I'm sure you've both heard this before, but I don't work for vampires, I kill them."

"How many have you killed?"

"That's none of our business," Gregory said quickly.

Ha! That made him a little twitchy. She decided to answer. "I stopped counting when I got to twenty-five."

"Why?"

"Because it was depressing," she admitted.

"Just for the record, I don't have a problem with you killing vampires per se," the vampire announced.

"How utterly super of you."

"But, I feel like I have to clarify, vampires are like everybody else: Some of them are assholes, and some of them are saints, but most of them are somewhere in the middle."

"All the ones *I've* met have been assholes."

"But you've met me," he said, visibly hurt.

"Gregory, most of the vampires I've killed have started it by trying to kill *me*. How can you defend them?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it without a word.

"All righty then. Now, if you've got some information on where we can find Martigan, let's have it so we can *please* get off this grungy waterfront, find the fucker, *kill* the fucker, and I can go home and never see you again."

"Which one of us?" Eddie whined.

*God, God.* "Just *give*, Gregory. Please. I'm begging. I really am."

He grinned. "All right. In the interest of saving Eddie from federal assault, your wish is my command. According to my latest update, the fucker will be at the Park Street Station tomorrow night at eight. Fund-raiser for the Y."

"That's nice and specific," Eddie commented.

"And it matches with what I was able to find out, so it's probably accurate."  
*Score another one for Gregory. Damn it.*

"How'd you know this?" Eddie asked with exhausting excitement. "The ultra-secret society of vampires? Or vampire killers? You received an update? A secret update?"

"No, we read the neighborhood newsletter, dumb shit," Boo said kindly. "You have to know how things work, and why things work, and what's going on around you, all the time. Not only will the place be crawling with kids, it'll be crawling with kids in the foster program."

"No parents to notice they're gone," Gregory explained.

"Duh," Eddie snarked. "*That* much I could figure out on my own."

"And the state system... well, they do their best, but they're understaffed and underfunded. I'm sorry to say it would take days for anyone to notice a missing orphan."

*Sorry to say? Why does he even care?* "It'll be a smorgasbord for Martigan," she added. "He won't be able to resist."

"If it's not till tomorrow, why did we—you—go out tonight?"

"Sometimes it takes a few nights to case the dead guy—or gal—in general. Remember: Know what's going on around you, all the time."

Incredibly, Eddie had whipped out a pen and was taking notes on his palm. "... all... the... time..."

"Besides, killing two vampires in one night is too much to ask of anyone," Gregory said.

"Hmf," she replied.

"Two vampires or two dozen, we'll be there," Eddie said, sounding tough and flinty, tucking the pen behind his ear. Then, "Uh, right? We'll be there?"

Annoyingly, the vampire and the vampire hunter traded a look. "Sure," Gregory said with a total lack of conviction.

## CH@%!\*R 10



"You live here?"

Gregory stifled a laugh; it was obvious Eddie was being disabused of one cherished notion after another. They had pulled up outside a perfectly ordinary looking apartment building in Quincy, a perfectly ordinary southern suburb of Boston.

"Yeah."

"It's nice." He himself had a house on the beach on the Cape but then, he'd had a few decades to save up for it. And the security business was, as always, very good. "It's nice and... unassuming."

Boo snorted, but she didn't shoot him again, so he was marginally encouraged. He'd changed into a hole-free pair of slacks, but that was it until he went home. Frankly, he was amazed she had brought them to her *home*, of all things. But then, quite a bit about the evening had amazed him.

He wondered if she was lonely. It was a thought that had never occurred to him in the same context as the dreaded Ghost.

But it was something to think about.

"So this is your fortress of solitude, huh?" Eddie asked as they stepped into the elevator.

"Yes. I retreat here to bind the wounds inflicted upon me by man's inhumanity to

man. I use justice as my poultice."

Gregory coughed hard, so he wouldn't laugh hard. He caught Boo's eye but had to look away. Judging from the bite on Eddie's neck, his evening was going badly enough.

And... for a second... he could have sworn she winked at him.

Impossible. He was just getting sentimental in his old age.

Even in the flickering fluorescent elevator lighting, she was stunning, and though he'd looked away to avoid cracking up, he found himself looking at her again. To his surprise, Boo was eyeing him back. This was nerve-racking, while at the same time stimulating.

Eddie, the game little fellow, hadn't given up. "So you moved here after the grisly death of your parents?" he asked, following her to apartment 9C.

"My parents are still alive," she replied.

"Really? That's—wait!" Eddie threw up his hands and Gregory walked right into them. "She has to invite you in."

"No I don't, dumbass," she said kindly, unlocking the door and walking in.

"It's just an old wives' tale," Gregory said, patting the boy on the shoulder. He felt a little sorry for Eddie; the kid was getting more crushed by the minute.

"You know, you could be a *little* nicer," he told her.

"I *could*?" She was already shrugging out of her jacket, revealing a black tank top, smoothly muscled arms, and gorgeous breasts, real old-fashioned breasts like the ones Ava and Marilyn had.

Boo tossed her black jacket onto the end table. Which was also black. As were the sofa, coffee table, chairs, and lamps.

"Whoa," Eddie said, staring around the room.

"My home away from etcetera," Boo said. "I'd offer you guys a drink, but one of you is a parasite and the other one isn't welcome."

"Ha ha," he said to Eddie, "you're a parasite."

"Your apartment is *all black*."

"I'm glad you've pointed that out. It's been on my mind for some time." She twirled a ghost-white strand of hair on an equally white finger. "Do you think it has some sort of deep psychological meaning?"

Eddie seemed to realize he was stating the obvious (not to mention skating on thin ice), so he switched tactics. "You said earlier—you said your parents are alive?"

"Sure. They're still running the café, last time I checked."

"Oh. Well, that's... that's good."

Gregory looked around inside the slightly cluttered, conventional-except-for-the-color-scheme apartment. There were black stuffed animals—a dragon and a bear—on the couch, a black blanket crumpled in the lap of the recliner, a chess set in the corner—both sides black. "How in the world did you get into the business you're in?" *And how in the world do you know which piece is yours?*

She took a Beck's Dark out of the fridge, used the edge of the counter to snap the cap off, and took a drink. Her long throat worked thirstily as she sucked it down, and he had to look away. "I took an aptitude test in high school and it came back 'vampire killer.' "

"You had a mysterious destiny," Eddie guessed, "and fate called upon you."

"I had a mysterious Poli Sci test," she replied, "and a vampire called upon me. Luckily, my shotgun worked fine."

"You killed a vampire with a shotgun?"



"No, shit for brains," she replied kindly. "I made him mad with a shotgun. I killed him with my pasta scoop."

"Well, I've got to hear the rest of this one," Gregory said, and pulled out a black chair and made himself comfortable.

## CH@%!\*R 11



"Do you know what happens to an albino in the wild? It gets eaten. It stands out with its freakish coloring and predators just can't resist. They move in and snap it up."

"I think I see where you're going with this."

"Listen, Luke Dorkwalker, I'm not in a sharing mood very often, so shut up and listen, willya?"

"Sorry."

"Just... hush up for five seconds, okay? I saved your life, and in return you're gonna be quiet."

"That doesn't seem—"

*"Eddie."*

"Sorry."

"I had a perfectly ordinary life. In fact, if I go back there, my perfectly ordinary life is waiting for me. I worked in the cafe to earn money for college; I'm welcome back home anytime.

"And speaking of college, that's where it all started. It wasn't that I survived a vampire attack and it changed my life. It's that they kept attacking me. The first time, living through it was dumb luck. The second time, I was more pissed than scared."

"You were probably more pissed than scared the first time, too," Eddie suggested.

"Shush. There aren't that very many vampires, Eddie. There's lots more of us than there are of them. You've got a better chance of being killed in a plane crash than being attacked by a vampire."

"I never fly."

She rubbed her pale eyebrows. "But I've been attacked a bunch of times. It's like I said. I stand out, and they can't resist. The third time, I found out there had been a reward for the vampire that had attacked me. It paid my rent for eight months, and bought my schoolbooks for the year. So I thought, why not survive vampire attacks for a living?"

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"So... it really is just a job."

"Yep."

"How'd you get so good at it?" Gregory couldn't help asking.

"You mean besides years of practice? Look, I understand you guys, okay? I have to stay out of the sun, too... I go outside at noon for five minutes, and I've got a nasty sunburn. I prefer it at night, just like you. My senses have sharpened over the years because of it... like you. I've got shitty day vision but can see well at night. Like you. That's all there is. That's the big secret."

"Why are you telling me this?" For him, Eddie had disappeared; he was focused only on her. For him, everyone might have disappeared.

"I—I don't know." She looked frightened for a moment, an expression so fleeting he wondered if it had been wishful thinking on his part. "I really don't."

Eddie's mouth was moving, but he wasn't saying anything. Oh.

Yes he was. They just weren't listening. "... nice of you to let us crash here."

"It's not nice," she replied shortly. "I can't get rid of you for the time being, and I can't let *him* walk around."

"You mean to pen me up like a dog?" Gregory asked pleasantly.

"I don't know what I mean," she muttered, and stomped out of the room.

## CH@%!\*R 12



"Checkmate."

"Shit."

"Checkmate."

"Shit."

"Checkmate."

"Shit!" She leaped to her feet and kicked over the coffee table. "Son of a *bitch!*"

"Hey, keep it down," Eddie said. "I'm watching the *Buffy* marathon."

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

"Up for another one?" he asked, careful not to smile. From the way she was kicking things around the living room, he guessed not.

"I don't know what you're getting so mad about," Eddie commented, staring at the screen. "He's got, what? Forty-five years of experience playing?"

"Forty-nine," he corrected.

"I hate vampires," she muttered, stalking into the kitchen.

"Hmm, the mighty vampire killer is a sore loser. Who would have guessed?"

"Shut up, fangs-for-brains." He could hear her slamming cupboard doors open and closed.

"Can I have another Zima?" Eddie asked.

"You didn't have a first Zima. Do they even make Zima anymore?" He heard her sigh. "Gregory, do you want a beer?"

"I don't drink... beer."

Eddie chortled.

"God, God."

"Don't do that, it hurts my head," he called.

"*That's* too bad."

"What?" Eddie asked. "Saying God? You mean there's finally one thing about the myths that are true?"

"Apparently so."

"But how come? I mean, you seem like a really nice guy."

"Seem like," she called from the other room.

"You're a comedian when you're not helping bad vampires get staked, for G—for crying out loud. Why shouldn't you be able to, I dunno, say the Lord's Prayer or whatever?"

Gregory shuddered all over. "I imagine it's an intrinsic part of being a vampire, like needing to drink blood. Can we not talk about it?"

"Does it mean you're *intrinsically* evil?" Boo asked, coming back to the living room. She set down her beer and righted the coffee table. Gregory got down on his hands and knees to help her pick up the scattered pieces.

"You don't go to church," he pointed out, picking up the queen. "Does that mean you're bad?"

She stared at him, a rook in her fist. "How did you know that?"

"I didn't," he admitted. "I guessed. I would imagine you're out late on Saturday nights, so you sleep in on Sundays. At least, I always went there on Sunday mornings."

She blinked. "Tons of good people don't go to church. It's just—their choice, is all."

"Exactly."

"So it's a choice issue? Are you arguing that needing to drink blood is—is no different than eating meat?"

"Meat is murder," Eddie said automatically, clicking past Nickelodeon.

"Yes."

"Because that's—that's not the same thing."

"No?" He smiled at her.

"No."

"Yes," Eddie said.

"Who's talking to you?"

"Shhhh. I love this part."

"God, God." She went back into the kitchen.

Gregory sat down beside Eddie just in time to see the vampire on the screen disappear in a cloud of dust. He snorted. Typical TV fairy tales. Really, they were part of the problem. It wouldn't be so hard to convince Ghost he was a man worthy of her feminine attentions if she hadn't been exposed to...

Well. That wasn't fair. She'd been attacked, several times by her reckoning. And ridding the world of scum was her job. It was enough to make anyone jaded. He remembered when he was on the BPD and despaired of meeting a woman who wasn't a prostitute, thief, husband-killer, or political fixer. Heck, back then there

hadn't been any women cops, even.

He imagined she had much the same problem.



## CH@%!\*R 13



"This should be fine," he said cheerfully.

She stared at him. "The bathtub."

"Sure."

Eddie peeked over her shoulder. "Oh, man, the tub?"

"He has to," she replied. "There aren't any windows in here. It's either here or under my bed." She gave Gregory a look. "Under my bed isn't an option."

He tried not to think about her bed. "Really, it'll be fine." He inspected it again.

"Is that Comet?"

"I cleaned house the day before yesterday," she admitted.

"It *does look* sparkling and fresh," Eddie said.

"Just let me borrow a pillow and a blanket and I won't trouble you anymore."

"If only," she mumbled.

"I'm not even going to ask if you need a coffin or the soil of your native land," Eddie said.

"Good," Gregory said in unison with her.

"This night is just getting weirder and weirder."

"Tell me about it," she said, leaving to get a pillow.

"I think he's asleep," Eddie said, ear jammed to the bathroom door.

"I doubt it. He won't sleep until the sun comes up." Boo checked her watch.

"About three hours from now."

"So what's he doing in there?"

"Reading the *Pioneer Press*, last time I checked."

"How do you even have the—never mind, what if he gets hungry and tries to... you know."

"Then I'll kill him," she said flatly.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that." She was making up the sofa bed for him, unfolding crisp, clean black sheets, and Eddie thought—not for the first time—that she was an interesting mix of thoughtful domestic and hardened killer. Just like Grandma!

"Come on, we've been hanging around him all night. We watched the Buffy marathon together! He made the best sangria I've ever had. He tried out his new stand-up material on us."

She shivered. "Don't remind me."

"So how can you treat him like he's one of the bad guys?"

"Because—he is."

"Come on, that's like saying the French are cowards, or Polish people are dumb."

"It's not the same thing," she said, sounding offended. She was tucking in the sheets in savage, economical motions, and he edged away from her a little. "At all."

"Boo, it's exactly the same thing. Admit it, he hasn't done one bad thing to either one of us."

"He mojo'd you."

"For my own good. I mean, I wish he wouldn't have—although it was kind of cool—but he had good reasons. And he hired you to kill Martigan."

"Territorial," she suggested.

"Or a really good guy who's using every resource he can—including you—to get a child killer off the streets. You just can't give him a chance because you think he's scum, like the ones you killed."

She didn't say anything.

"This is why you're a lone wolf," he guessed. "Roaming the world completing your sacred mission—"

"Eddie. *Please* don't."

"—because you've thought you were all alone. And you *have* been alone. Except there's someone out there for you... maybe... if you give him a chance. You just have to overlook him being the undead."

She shook her head.

"Look, I'm not saying you should, y'know, get married or anything. Just give him a chance."

"He hasn't been staked yet, has he? He's in my bathtub right this second, isn't he?" she griped. "That's as much as a chance as I've ever given any dead guy."

"Undead."

"Same thing."

"You know that's not true." Actually, he didn't know—she was pretty firmly prejudiced in that idea. But she wasn't unreasonable. Just abrupt. And bitchy. And quietly furious all the time. He hated to think of the state of her stomach lining.

And lonely. Very, very lonely.

"He's sort of perfect for you."

She snorted and fluffed a pillow. "Maybe you should date him."

"His Jedi trick totally wore off already. I think of him solely as a tall, great-looking blond guy with the shoulder-length locks of a god and eyes the color of the Caribbean." Eddie frowned. That had sounded less gay in his head.

"*Anyway*. Here's a guy who's interesting, smart—whipped your ass in chess pretty good, didn't he?—challenging, cool, funny, and he would overlook your staking tendencies. Heck, he'd probably help you, if you wanted."

"I don't need—"

"Yeah, yeah, lone wolf, work alone, die alone, I get it. All's I'm saying is, you could do worse than Gregory. In this whole apartment, there aren't any pictures. It doesn't look like you have anything. No boyfriends, nothing of you, not even your parents. How do you live?"

She fluffed the pillow again. Actually, she punched it. He guessed she was imagining it was his head. "I have my work."

"Lame," he announced.

"I have plenty of things besides that!" she almost shouted. She "fluffed" the pillow by kicking it. "I live a rich and satisfying life, Eddie Batley!"

"Lame," he coughed into his fist. He supposed death was right around the corner, but unlike *some* people in the room, he really did feel he had lived a rich and satisfying life, and could go to his grave (after being beaten to death by an angry albino vampire slayer) a satisfied man. "So massively lame."

"Goddammit," she snarled, and stepped up on the sofa bed, walked across it, stepped down, grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt, and mashed her lips to his.

"Eh?" he managed.

"Kiss me," she demanded, then mashed on him again.

"Let go, or I'll get my pepper spray," he mumbled around her lips. Her breasts were pressed against his chest, her pretty mouth was against his, her long legs against his thighs.

It was mildly terrifying.

He got an elbow up in an attempt to fend her off. "Boo, I'm really super flattered, here. But I'm also kind of scared of you, which doesn't entirely do it for me."

"Shut up, Boy Blunder."

"See, calling me names isn't erotic." He managed to wrest his mouth free. "Not those kinds of names, anyway. Look, I'm out of my mind, okay? I mean, a woman as great-looking as you is never, ever going to throw herself at me ever again."

Despite the circumstances, she grinned a little. "That's probably true."

He resisted the urge to smell her hair. "But you're only molesting me because you'd rather be in the tub with *him*. And you're afraid to face it."

The grin vanished. She glared into his eyes. "I'm not afraid of anything."

He squashed the impulse to grab her boobs. "Prove it."

## CH@%!\*R 14



The bathroom door crashed open, and Gregory jumped. He'd long mastered the art of ignoring the input of his enhanced hearing, so as not to eavesdrop on people (unless he needed to, naturally). So he'd peripherally heard the two of them chatting and moving around, but beyond that hadn't paid much attention.

Ghost was framed in the doorway. She stepped into the tiny bathroom and slammed the door. He dropped the newspaper (and his jaw). This was it! She was going to kill him. Try, anyway. He wondered how best to fend her off without really hurting her. Maybe crack her hard enough in the jaw so she went down in one? Get an arm around her throat until she passed out from lack of oxygen? That might bruise her, assuming he wasn't coughing up splinters by then, but maybe she—

"I'm taking a poll," she said in a voice that shook. "If I stripped and tried to seduce you, you'd have sex with me, right?"

He blinked. Was it a trick question? Had to be. "Of course."

"Right! And it wouldn't be because I'm some pathetic loser, right?"

He was trying to process current events. "You're not pathetic. You're not a loser, either. And I'm not just saying that because you appear to be not killing me."

"Exactly!" she said triumphantly.

"Er—what's this about?"

"I'll tell you what it's about," she said, stabbing a finger in his direction. "We're going to *date*. Starting right now!"

"We are?" he gasped.

"Damned right!" She moved the rest of the way into the small room and climbed into the tub, falling on top of him when her grip slipped. If he'd had any breath, it would have whooshed out of his lungs. "If I kiss you, you're going to kiss me back, right?"

"Of course." Then he cupped the back of her skull in his hand and pressed his mouth to hers.

"M'not a loser," she muttered, and her mouth bloomed beneath his like a perfect white flower.

He sucked on her tongue, his hands busy at her shirt, and her hands were occupied, too, and they groped and wrestled in the supremely uncomfortable bathtub. He didn't especially care—he would have taken her in a rose garden, a swamp, a dead forest, a basement.

He got her shirt off, shredded her jeans, and pushed her bra up around her neck, as she clawed for his belt buckle. "Do *not* bite me," she said, chewing on his earlobe.

He gritted his teeth as her pale breasts filled his hands, her scent—daisies and Tide—filled his head. "That's... not going to be easy."

"Gregory. I couldn't handle that."

"All right."

"I mean it." Her hands were on him, stroking him with a feathery touch, and he groaned.

"All right, hon." *Oh boy. Don't bite, don't bite.*

"I'll make it worth your while," she whispered, her grip firming, her touch like rough silk.

"Yes," he said. "You will." He slipped a finger through her downy crease and found her damp, felt her squirm against him, and ground his teeth harder. *Don't bite, don't bite, don't you dare bite.*

She wiggled, her knees coming down on either side of him, and he put his arms around her and pressed on her lower back. Sliding into her was like gliding into a fantasy with sight and scent and sound. She moaned and rested her forehead on his shoulder, her white hair brushing his mouth.

"You're every dream I've ever had," he told her, and kissed her throat.

"My name is Boo," she said, and shivered against him.

He nuzzled her nipples and badly wanted to take one into his mouth, but was afraid he'd bite her... holding back was getting *very* difficult. But her squirming and gasping was delectable, and he felt his eyes roll back as he pulsed within her.

"Oh boy," he managed as she sprawled on top of him.

"I think I've bruised my elbows," she admitted, trying to sit up.

"You probably bruise like a peach."

She grinned down at him. "I've never heard it put quite like that before. And you're right."

"Want to show me?"

"Sure. But mostly," she admitted, "I want to get the hell out of this bathtub."



## CH@%!\*R 15



"Okay!" Eddie enthused when Boo came into the living room around two the next day. Gregory was still conked out in her bed—she'd rigged up some black blankets across the window before they'd gotten busy again—and super geek enthusiasm was a little tough to take first thing in the afternoon. "So, what? When's Gregory getting up? When do you want to leave? I assume you want to get there first, so Martigan can walk into your clever trap. Do you think I can take a piss? Will the G-man care? Will he notice?"

"Don't call him that, ugh." Then, "You haven't gone to the bathroom yet?"

"I can't do it if someone's watching," he whined.

"Well, he's not in there. I—I changed my mind and let him sleep under my bed." They'd crept across the hall so quietly the night before, Eddie had never woken up. Thank God.

"Oh." Eddie galloped past her, and she heard the door slam. She sighed and went into the kitchen for a glass of juice. One problem solved.

Several remained. What had she done? It hadn't been just to prove something to the Boy Blunder; she knew herself well enough to realize there was more to it than that. And she'd wanted Gregory—no doubt about that. Despite proof of his—his condition. Two hours ago, feeling morbid, she nevertheless couldn't resist taking his pulse as he... rested? Slumbered?

Eight per minute. Respiration: four.

She had heard the rumors over the years—that vampires weren't dead, it was a virus and you either caught it or you didn't. If you did catch it, your pulse and breathing slowed down permanently, you couldn't go out, your senses and reflexes improved, you couldn't tolerate solids. She had always dismissed it as vampire fantasy: "We're not the awful night creatures you think we are, we're sick."

Yeah.

Sure.

Whether it was true or not—and she was no scientist—Gregory was no—how would Eddie put it? "Ravenous member of the undead hell-horde."

She gulped more juice, remembering his hands on her, his cock *in* her, his mouth... his mouth. He had wanted to bite her. Badly. And hadn't, because she had asked him not to. That had touched her... had been enough to let her relax enough to reach orgasm, a very rare thing.

He'd been more careful the second time, and so had she, and they had ended up caressing each other and sliding together for a lovely long time. He'd chewed through her black puma pillow and mock-threatened to eat Eddie before they were done, and she found herself laughing in bed for the first time in... ever.

It was all rather strange and wonderful.

"Okay!" Eddie said again, coming back out. "Want to get a bite?"

"Sure, dumbass," she replied cheerfully. "I'll buy."

The bedroom door opened, and Gregory was stretching as he strolled through it. He opened his mouth, and she grabbed his shirt and arched up on tiptoe to hiss into his ear. "Don't say anything to Eddie."

Fortunately, the object of her concern was entranced by *A Very Brady Christmas*.

Gregory blinked at her. "What? Why not?"

"Because, okay?"

His blue eyes narrowed. "I'm your dirty little secret, is that it?"

"Yes, that's exactly it, now don't say anything."

"You were supposed to deny that."

"Well, I can't. Please, okay?"

"Mmm."

"We'll have to work that one out."

He still looked disgruntled, but sounded mildly encouraged. "All right."

"Okay, great." She forced the word out. "Thanks."

"I'm just a man, you know," he told her gently. "There's nothing special about me."

"Ha," she said, snuck a glance over her shoulder, then gave him a quick kiss.

## CH@%!\*R 16



"Okay, are we ready? We're ready." Eddie jogged in place. "My reflexes are razor sharp. Let's go kill a vampire! A bad one, I mean."

"Sounds like a plan," Gregory said, and punched him in the back of the neck. Eddie dropped like a rock into a pond.

"Oh, excellent," Boo said. "Grab his ankles."

"It's just that it's dangerous," Gregory said half-apologetically, picking Eddie up and placing him on the couch. After a moment, he tucked the remote into the snoring man's hand.

"Hey, you don't have to tell me. I was ready to tie him up."

"Oooh."

She gave him a look. "The last thing we need is him stumbling around in an alley babbling Buffy-isms while we're trying to flank Martigan."

"Agreed." He gazed at her. She was dressed in a black sweater, another pair of black leggings, and her hair was caught back with a black headband. She was checking her tote bag, and chewing gum. "Frankly, I'm not happy about you being there tonight."

She glanced up from her rummaging. "Is this the part where you're all annoying and overprotective?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"To quote the Boy Blunder: lame."

"Since he's unconscious..." He opened his arms.

She evaded his embrace, smiling regretfully. "First we kill the bad guy. Then we can have sex."

"Slave driver," he grumbled, following her out the door.

"So have you heard about the vampire queen?"

Boo was watching the crowd and tipped her head toward him. "I've heard... some things," she said carefully.

"Rumors, I suppose."

"It's as silly as vampirism being something you can catch, like the flu."

"It *is* something you can catch."

"Let's argue about it later. Besides, you're wrong. And I don't know whether what I've heard about Elizabeth The One is true or fantasy."

"There is something to that. I doubt she can endure sunlight and wear... religious icons."

"If it sounds like she's becoming a problem, I'll go out to the Cities to kill her. I've been watching the local papers... there hasn't been a sudden increase of missing people. The crime rates are essentially unchanged."

"I doubt it will be as cut-and-dried as that. She overthrew what's-his-name... Nostro. Killed him and took the throne."

"What are you saying?" She was afraid to look away from the milling adults and children, afraid to look him in the eyes.

"I'm saying if she becomes a problem, I'll go out there with you."

"Well." *I work alone. Don't bother. Butt out. That's so sweet of you. I loved*

*having you in my bed. I don't want you in danger.* "Thank you."

"There, now. Was that so hard?" he teased.

"Oh, shush." She stiffened. The man on the fringe of the crowd, talking to a cocoa-colored girl—she looked about eight, and he looked about twenty. He was crouched in front of her, listening intently, hands relaxed and loose, head cocked attentively. Dark hair. Dark eyes. High cheekbones, pale skin, scar on the chin.

*Gotcha.*

"Oh, you prick," Gregory was muttering; he'd spotted the killer, too. "Get the fuck away from her."

"Easy."

"If he puts a finger on her, I'm cutting off his head."

"We'll do that anyway."

"Okay," he said, comforted.

Martigan pointed, and the child nodded warily. He said something—Boo couldn't pick it up over the murmuring of the crowd—and the girl laughed and nodded again, more relaxed. "Prick. Prick. Prick."

"Don't tell me what he's saying to her, I don't even want to know."

Martigan gestured, and the girl followed his hands. He caught her chin, gently forcing her to look back at him, and spoke again.

Gregory twitched. "Easy," Boo said.

The child nodded yet again, much more slowly this time, and even from a distance Boo could see her eyes had gone glassy. It occurred to her that Gregory had never tried to pull any vampire mind tricks on her.

*Probably he doesn't dare.*

*And maybe he wouldn't do that to take advantage. Just for someone's own good,*

*like Eddie.*

*And maybe you should keep your mind on business, dumbass.*

"Okay," she said, and they followed Martigan and the child through the crowd and into Public Gardens.

"We're too far away."

"We're fine."

"He could hurt her before we get to her."

"You can get to her in time."

His lips thinned. "I appreciate your confidence, but..."

"Gregory, I do this for a living, okay? Trust me. Cripes, you're a nervous wreck."

"It's just... she's so little."

"It'll be fine." There were fewer and fewer people in the park, just the occasional couple leaning against a tree, talking softly. Martigan had a hand on the child's shoulder and was leading her onto a deserted path.

"Ready?"

"So ready."

Gregory went left, and Boo hurried forward, dropping her hand into her bag.

"Excuse me?" she called, her voice high and sweet. "We're looking for our little girl? Jenny? Is that you?"

Martigan turned, his hand tightening on the child's shoulder. He was relaxed, smiling. "Sorry, this isn't her." He got a good look at Boo as she got closer and the smile faded. "You look—kind of familiar. You—"

"I'm too old for you," she said sweetly. "Why don't you let go of the kid before something unbelievably awful happens to you?"

He showed his teeth, and the girl yelped as his hand clamped down, but her dreamy expression didn't change. "You're Ghost."

"Remind me to get a wig."

"Come a step closer, and I'll unzip her like a bass."

"Oh, John." She smiled. "You'll do that anyway." Then the stake burst from his chest, and Gregory was there, yanking the girl away, stepping back as Martigan thudded to the ground. Boo watched the killer's eyes go as glassy as the girl's, cloud over, die.

"It's the little things in life that make it all worthwhile," she said, and took the child's hand.



## CH@%!\*R 17



"We make a good team."

"Screw that." She noticed he had tightened up—she could feel it in the arm against her shoulders—and clarified. "We make a *great* team."

"We do, don't we? That piece of shit never knew what hit him."

"All part of the plan." She was getting out her keys; an hour had passed, and they had seen the child safely back to her group. Mercifully, the little girl remembered nothing.

"Scumbag," Gregory said. "It was too quick for him."

"It's over for him, and that's the important thing." She swung open the door, and they beheld an enraged, disheveled Eddie, who had clearly been on the way out. Gregory's arm slid off her shoulders, but Eddie was too puffed with outrageous indignation to notice.

"You guys suck! *You* sucker-punched me and *you* let him! Bad!" He shook his finger at them. "Very very bad!"

"We just didn't want you to get hurt," Gregory tried to explain.

"Yeah, dumb shit, we would have felt all awful inside if something had happened to you. Besides, you would have cramped our style."

"Oooh, I like that," Gregory said, kissing her ear. "'Our' style."

"Hey, hey. You're supposed to be my deep dark secret, remember?"

"Sorry, I forgot." He was actually nibbling on her ear now, and she was laughing and trying to shut the door and fending him off at the same time.

"Sure you did. Big undead jerk."

"What the *hell*?" Eddie gasped. "What did I miss?" He looked around wildly.

"How long have I been out? What month is it?"

"You were out long enough," she said, and put her arms around Gregory, and kissed him.

"Not such a secret anymore?" he asked, kissing her back.

"Eh, it's just the Boy Blunder. If he blabs, I can always kill him."

Eddie's reaction was best left to the imagination.

