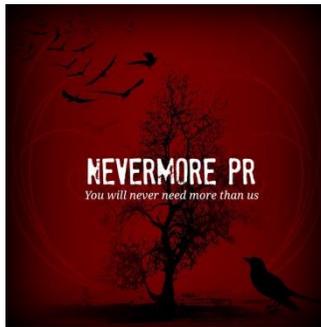


Solstice

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Solstice

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Certain is it that there is no kind of affection so purely angelic as of a father to a daughter. In love to our wives there is desire; to our sons, ambition; but to our daughters there is something which there are no words to express. ~Joseph Addison

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I started this project close to six years ago, it was more of a hobby than an actual project. It started as more of a script than it did an actual novel. I had this idea that I was going to be part of show business at a very young age. It seemed like I dedicated my life to useless movie knowledge that was going to put me on some sort of pedestal, and then I would be set for life. Then, like most things, life happened. It turned out that I was more of a storyteller than the actor.

One of the biggest obstacles I wanted to overcome was the stereotype that most first novels were more an autobiography than a work of fiction. That worked out for the most part. While this book is not about me and more about vampires, it definitely has some aspects to my life that I integrated into the story. The biggest was the actual father-daughter dynamic. When the project started, it was more of an action script for HBO than anything else, more action than dialogue. There was no dynamic between Solstice and Gavin when I originally started to write, but when my daughter was born, I found there was something more to this story than I had originally thought. In a time full of vampires that never graduate high school and always has to have werewolves, I needed something more. There had to be an audience for something different. It bothered me that when I walked into the local bookstores, I saw that all of the vampire books have a black cover; I am not the kind of guy that likes what everyone else likes. To be honest, I am a bit of a snob when it comes to my entertainment.

Chances are, whatever you may like, I probably don't have as big of a flair for. Hopefully though, you will like this.

To be clear, this is meant to be a three part series. The first part is meant to be in the first person. I didn't want to over crowd the book with too much. I want people to get invested in the situation and the characters. When and if the next part comes out, it will be a hell of a ride. By making the first novel shorter in comparison, it opens up so much more for the next one.

I'll shut up now and let you read. This has been a long time coming and I hope that people take to it. If you want more, then drop me a line.

~Bryan W. Dull
Midnight on August 28th, 2011

INTRODUCTION

There was something growing inside her. Something that had no business coming into this world. It started out normal enough. She got pregnant with the man she adored and they went the usual adult route; house, lawn, and jobs. Everything was as perfect as it could be, and the young couple was happy and in love.

The baby shower came around on a Saturday evening and the mother-to-be held it at her best friend, Leonard's house. Yes, her baby shower was held by her best, gay, friend. Her life was very clichéd in many ways. Life was like a sitcom on one of the main four sitcom channels. A woman, very tied down to her work with no plans of dating or even having kids, gets tied up with a group of people including her husband. Leonard was just the icing on the cake. He had the fashion sense of a woman, and she didn't have to worry about her boyfriend sleeping with him.

It's apparently a rule to have friends act obnoxiously and give dirty gifts. Clothes, toys, cribs, and other useful items were given; with a side of dirty board games to go along with it. All the women had fun sipping their alcohol and eating tiny cakes on expensive napkins while laughing and gossiping. This crowd is obviously where the term "clucking like hens" comes from. Even with the carrying on and all the gross sex talk, she had a feeling like something was wrong or that something was off.

She was beautiful and was the perfect blend between the girl next door and sexy goddess. Her husband knew it, and everyone else thought it, even if they wouldn't admit it. But the mother-to-be

didn't think of herself in that respect. All she wanted was a good life for her and the others she cared about. By most standards, she was the perfect woman and even perhaps a perfect person with her set of morals.

The sun had already set at around six in the evening, when the party was over. It was getting close to winter and the days had begun getting shorter. She kissed her friend on the cheek and smiled at him while waving "goodbye". She left Leonard's apartment that sat above a quiet antique shop in the downtown area of Spartanburg. Despite the tranquility, she felt uneasy to be walking around the neighborhood so late at night

The moon broke through the clouds to light up the one lone skyscraper that towered over an array of government buildings. Little else of any significance occupied the district, apart from a few restaurants, a cheap hot-dog stand that was known for great food but bad digestive results, and a drive-through burger bar where the "rich kids" hung out. There was a certain sense of home a while back, maybe ten years ago, but now there was nothing but fear that plagues the streets. Just like any downtown area, there is always the fear in the back of your mind. Fear that you may get mugged or shot were the thoughts our lady had. This was all due to the television of course.

If she wasn't an avid listener of the local stations, she would probably not let the shooting that occurred a block away affect her. All the same, she clung on to her purse and rapidly walked to her car that was parallel parked around the corner.

She thought she heard whispering behind her, almost a taunt in a way. She flung her head over her right shoulder and looked through the corner of her eyes. Of course, there was nothing. She took a deep breath and watched her breath leave her body in the crisp winter night. She was starting to feel uncomfortable. "Too much time on my feet today," she thought.

She wasn't concerned about going into labor since her actual due date wasn't for another couple of months at least. She started waddling around the corner as fast as she could, because she was cold, not because of her size. That was the lie she told herself at least. And while that may have been the reason she gave herself for her hurrying, it was really the fact that she was scared of her town and of the night. The town and the night she once knew. Where

growing up, she could roam freely and not have a care in the world. But perhaps that was youth and ignorance making her feel that way. Those were the good old days and she hopes her daughter will feel the same way about her youth.

Finally, she came up to her car. The sight of her red Toyota was a sight to behold, because it seemed like she was walking forever. She fumbled to reach inside her purse. Her hand wasn't reaching far enough. Wait. Her other hand was still clenched to it so hard it was making it impossible for her other hand to enter the abyss of make-up, gum, and different wallets. She took another deep breath as she looked down into her purse. Her breath was warm as she fumbled for her keys, and it felt great when it came lingering around her nose. She was in the habit of searching for items in a frantic way, but there was a faint smell of fear in the air, and it was hers.

She picked out the locking device for her Toyota and pressed the button that makes the funny double beep sound. Our lady didn't know why, but she looked down in her purse and looked at a little miniature baseball bat that was given to her by her mother. "Use it to help protect you," her mom told her. She never took her mother too seriously in life, and maybe that was a mistake, but she kept the bat all the same. Something was trying to tell her to keep the bat in mind, maybe to even have it ready. What was this perversion? She didn't believe in psychics or premonitions, but tonight may lead to the contrary.

She didn't take it out. To do so would be to admit that things she never believed in could be true, and she was too damn stubborn to be proven wrong. Sometimes going with the flow helps you as well.

She opened her door to get into the driver's side. She threw her bag full of things onto the passenger side seat and plopped herself into her own. "*That feels good,*" she thought, as the pressure from her feet started to go away. There was a sigh of relief from her, and then she felt the air changed on the back of her neck. It got warm. It wasn't natural. Someone was breathing down her neck, in the most literal way possible. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she felt a hand nearing it.

"Yes," the stalker said, "you will do nicely." His voice was deep and hissed every other word, making his sentences creepier

than they needed to be. From the lady's perspective, he was not behind her per se, but to her right, like he was scooting himself to the other side of the car. She reached for her purse to find the bat she saw a minute ago. The bat that she secretly made fun of could be the tool to save her tonight.

The man, if that was indeed what he was, was skinny. He looked much underfed in her eyes. His nose was long and did not particularly fit the rest of his face. The man, who was now grinning at our lady, had the biggest eyes. Some would argue that they were beautiful, so much so that one could ignore all of his imperfections and long to be with him. Then he spoke.

"You are going to be part of a very special science project," he hissed. The woman continued to fondle for her little bat. "I don't want you to think it was anything personal, but I need your child," he continued. She quietly yelped at the thought of what this monster wanted with an unborn child. She wanted to say something. She wanted to plead with him and ask him to leave her alone, but she couldn't...his teeth were already in her neck. She felt the quick but seductive bite but still managed to pull out her bat and with all of her might she struck the bat upon his head and broke it in half. This got his attention, enough to get him away from her neck.

She knew what kind a creature this man was. After all the stories and all the tainted beliefs, she finally realized that her parents were wrong and there was such a thing as monsters. All of the monsters she thought that were under her bed and hiding in her closet when she was younger was just a dream in comparison to what she is witnessing now. However, she couldn't think about that, she had seen enough movies and read enough books to know what this mysterious, sickly man in black was...A vampire.

She turned around in her seat with blood trickling down her body and started to stab the monster in the chest with the broken bat. Trying to reach any heart she could find in the evil being. He was laughing at her, telling her that it tickled and how she was wasting her time. He was pushing her harder, and when she couldn't stab harder she grabbed her side in pain. The vampire in black composed himself and asked, "When exactly did I lose your trust?" He was mocking her and laughing at his own wit. She writhed in pain. He opened the car door on the other side of her

and floated slowly out of it. She reached for him, hoping that there was a glimmer of good in him and that he would help her. His eyes turned kind for a minute.

“I am sorry,” he said to her, “I can’t help you now.” Then in a comedic gesture he continued, “But I can help you help yourself!” He reached into her bag, grabbed her cell phone, and placed it inside her hand. “He guided her pointer finger to the “9” on her phone and then to the “1” and pressed it twice. His cold finger was over hers like a person would help a blind person. “There,” he exclaimed, “you should get some help soon, but it may take a while for them to find you.” Our lady in distress thought to herself, “*Why?*” The creature in black looked down his long nose at her and said, “That’s easy, you can’t talk to tell them where you are.” He was right; the punctures in her neck were so bad that she could not form any words.

“Relax,” he continued, “you’ll survive this.” He was right, in a way. He left her in the car with an open cell phone that had blood smears going from the “9” button to the “1” and then “Send.” All the while, on the other end of the line, a person was asking what her emergency was. If they only knew.

It took the Spartanburg police and emergency vehicles all of thirty minutes to find her. When they did, it wasn’t her neck that needed tending to. It had healed already. It was the labor pains that she was experiencing. She never thought that childbirth would be so horrible. It felt like someone was stretching her uterus in an unnatural way. No one in the ambulance asked her about her neck or the dried blood on it because of the wailing she was omitting.

Once inside the ambulance, the driver said they would be going to Memorial Hospital. None of that really mattered to the woman because her body was being torn from the inside. She was flailing in pain to the point that police and paramedics had to strap her hands down and keep her knees up in stirrups in case the baby came early. And it did just that.

She watched the men in blue uniforms work effortlessly to attach the gurney to the floor of the van. Then one of them started hooking her up to heart monitors and the other started in with getting blood samples.

“THIS ISN’T RIGHT!” she yelled, and then whimpered. “There’s something wrong with my baby and that man is to

blame...” The medic asked her if she was referring to the husband, because most women cuss out or blame their husbands during delivery. “NO!” she screamed, “HE WAS EVIL!” The police and the paramedic looked at each other in confusion.

By this time the ambulance was on the move. The driver decided to take the back roads to get to the hospital. The woman’s upper torso rose up and she screamed at the top of her now damaged lungs. The yell came out like a cough when one has strep throat. The paramedic took a seat and opened her legs to see how far along the baby was. “What the hell,” the paramedic exclaimed. At first glance it looked like tentacles coming out of her vagina, but as the baby was being delivered, it was the baby’s hands stretching out of her mother to get out. The medics stared and stood away from the anomaly that was happening. The medics already knew, but did not say anything due to the frightening sight, but the child being born was already in its first year of life, and because of this, the baby was inadvertently killing her own mother.

When the mother looked down at her baby coming out between her legs, there was a tender moment that occurred where they saw each other for the first time. Both of their eyes were opened and watching each other. She knew that this was going to be the only time she would see her daughter and she wanted to take it in as much as she could. The mother was gasping for air and the child looked at her strangely, and then in concern, like she knew something was wrong.

There was a brief sense of calm before the storm, but then the calm moment passed and the chaos began. The pain was too much for the mother to bear and the final cry came out of her. When she cried out, her child cried out as well. Her vagina, along with the rest of her body was tearing, and there was no doctor or surgeon that could fix her. The medics covered the ears of both mother and daughter as they were both screaming. One in pain, the other in fear. The daughter just rested inside of her mother while screaming. It was a disturbing sight.

The body of the ambulance started buckling. The ambulance lights and sirens flew off the top of the van falling onto the cars behind it. The men inside were trying to get away from it all as they were not even sure of what was happening. The roof of the van peeled back as well as the sides, like someone was peeling a

banana. The driver put on the brakes and went gliding across the ice that was covering the roads, which in turn, flipped the ambulance over. Normally one can survive that, but when there is no roof people tend to fly out of vehicles, in which some did.

The mother witnessed the medics trying to hold on for dear life, but instead they got cut in half by the metal that once held the ambulance together and was now a safety hazard. She prayed for a moment that this was all a dream from eating something bad or something to that effect; but it wasn't, and deep down she already knew that. She also knew that her daughter was destroying the vehicle somehow. Something happened to her and her child when that monster bit her.

The medical van was now sliding on the ice upside down and the mother was hanging along with it. The gurney was safely fastened to the bottom when they entered the van originally, so when the van flipped over, it stayed in place. The mother hung upside down, ready to die from internal injuries and blood loss. She wondered why she wasn't healing like she did in the car. Was it because her daughter was no longer in her? Where was she? She was no longer attached to her in any way, not even by the umbilical cord. She didn't know where she was. It looked desolate, like the driver drove out to the sticks and got lost.

As time passed, the mother just gasped for air and felt the need for water. Her lips were cracked and her voice was strained. She tried to shout for help, but it came out more like a whimper. The miracle was that the gurney had not fallen from its locked position. It will though and the mother knew it, like she knew most things that were going to happen tonight. The damage of the vehicle alone was enough evidence to know that this small miracle would not last. She prayed that she would die before that happened because the pain from the fall and the fact that her knees would receive the impact first was more than she could bear.

She tried to breathe slowly and calmly, not for herself but to listen for her child. She just wanted a sign that she was still alive. Perhaps a cooing of some sort, but it didn't happen. Instead she listened to what sounded like flesh ripping and bones cracking. The mother wanted to believe that it was fabric caught in some metal making the sound, but she knew better. In fact, she knew too much. As swollen and in pain as she was, she knew that her

newborn child was not human. Not in the way that she would have planned.

It hurt when she breathed. Her insides were mangled from the sudden growth of her child inside her womb. It especially hurt on the right side of her body. What she may have known deep down is that her lung was not in the same place it was before. In fact, one of her ribs; the fifth rib from the top, had broken at the curve and punctured the lung. Her stomach alone was almost mush while her kidneys were pushed out further from where they needed to be, so much so that they were torn from their renal arteries. The fact that she was alive at all was a miracle itself.

The mother hung upside down for four hours in the ambulance until the gurney came loose from the floorboard and fell to the street pavement. Her knees broke in half because her legs were strapped to the stirrups. The pain was as unbearable as she thought, and she let out a soft cry. At least she thought she did. She could not scream or even talk anymore, and any chance of her getting help had died along with her. The mother's last breath was coming, and with the last breath she heard a whimper next to her telling her that she was sorry and didn't mean to hurt her mommy.

The mother's eyes filled with tears and with her last breath she told her, "I know, and mommy loves you." Her mouth was moving but no sound came out. Her own daughter could not hear her mother's voice. As she was dying, she watched her daughter walk out of the wreckage with the policeman's coat and hat, walking with bandages covering her feet to keep them protected. "*My smart little girl,*" she thought. Her daughter turned around with the sunlight behind her head and cracked a small smile with the right side of her face. Her daughter heard her, just not in the way we hear things. Maybe that too was a miracle.

The mother died a minute later, but she will always have the memory no matter what lies in the afterlife. Her favorite thing in the physical world was the sun in the morning and the fact that her daughter was in front of it, illuminating her little body, such a brilliant picture in her mind as she left this world. It reminded her of summer.

CHAPTER 1

There is something exhilarating about draining the life of something or someone that isn't normal, or human. The Shamrock Inn was the motel that you didn't pay per day, rather by the hour. It's a typical motel that's located off the highway. It had all the clichés of a dirty motel. The key didn't work the first time you turned it to get inside the room, there was wood paneling on the walls, paintings from the early seventies hanging above the bed, and reddish brown carpet that hadn't been replaced in God knows how many years. That in and of itself is the funny equation to this place. I think this is one of possibly many places that God is scared to touch. If He was here, then He must have left a long time ago. This is the place where monsters and sinners go. This is the place that you have to wear slippers whenever you walk on the floor, because you never know whose semen is caked into the carpet.

I followed a woman to this place tonight. She was a pretty lady, in a redneck Wal-Mart advertisement type of way. She had long red hair. Why do the trashy women dye their hair that color? Is it a deep seeded secret that men love red heads whether or not they'll admit it? I don't know. I like a natural sort of lady.

She had a red skirt on that barely covered her ass cheeks. She walked like she had one to many men in her panties recently. One could tell that she was a worn out woman, in more ways than one. The bags under her eyes told the story by themselves. She was a woman who works at night and feels so bad about the atrocities that she performed for money, that she goes home and lies in her

bed where her sheets are so clean and neat, but never clean enough to be able to enjoy them. There is always that lingering feeling of soiling the sheets with filth and sex of the men from the night before. She couldn't lay there and relax. Was it from the compulsive feeling, or is it the pain emanating from her ass due to the anal sex? She was so pathetic. She may have had such a good life ahead of her. She could have been a mommy or a doctor, but instead she was a whore.

I hate whores, disease spreading pieces of shit that they are. I will stop it, the filth that is spread. I hate this place.

She stumbles as she walks up the cement stairs to her room. There she will wait for the next piece of tail that is willing to dish out a twenty dollar bill. She catches herself on the white metal railing. I assume it was white, at least at some point. The evidence would suggest that it was. I still see paint chips on it. We'll just say that now its rust colored. She stops and coughs. Maybe that was enough cigarettes already, or maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe it's something that she caught, and you can take that any way you want.

I have an idea, let's call her Marlene. I have no idea why I picked that name. You see, I don't know her real name and I could care less because soon, the name won't even matter. Not that it ever did anyway. She tells her men, and sometimes women, to call her anything they want...slut.

Why do I care what this woman does? It's unnatural. The possibility of her spreading a disease to others sickens me. I know she does. I have been tracking the outbreak for a couple of months now. She is now known as a "fang-banger". I know, I know. I couldn't come up with a better name for them. Most people don't realize that vampires exist. Either they don't, or deep down inside they do, and they just don't want to admit it.

Ever since hurricane Katrina, a lot of people have moved to South Carolina in an effort to make a good home for themselves. That's just peachy for them, but so did the vampire population. Anyone who has watched enough film and television can tell you that a good amount of them live in Louisiana, or at least they did. So the fucking weather had to be a pain in the ass and cause the freaks with the overbites to migrate a little further north, but not

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north enough where people wouldn't recognize the twang in their voices.

Marlene attempted to open the door. It didn't work the first time, so she steadied herself and took her sweet time with it. How would I know that? That's the question you have been asking yourself this entire time, hasn't it? It's because I was the one waiting for her in that room. Room 316. I only need an hour anyway.

CHAPTER 2

“So what will it be,” she asked. I looked her over from head to toe, wondering if I would even consider paying for her in another life. The answer to that was “no”. She had this white button-up blouse on that looked like it was washed one too many times with the off brand detergent instead of the name brand. She also wasn’t wearing a bra. I suppose that was smart on her end. It provided easy access to her breasts, assuming that you liked the saggy ones. They looked like someone stuffed two grapefruits under their shirt around the bottom of the rib cage.

“How much,” I asked. She put her black purse down on the ratty wooden table that is meant to eat off of. With a general sigh of ‘I can’t stand going through the price list’, she answered, “Normal fuck job is a hundred per hour, a blow job is fifty, and the quick jerk will be twenty.” She sounded so bored. “Wow, if you could be any more excited I might go into a diabetic coma,” I joked. She looked at me as if she didn’t get the pun. She probably did, but was on to much smack to even give a shit, or she was naturally uneducated. *It must be tough being a cliché.*

Her arms were long and thin. She had been deprived of food for a while. There was no body fat on her and her legs were about the same. The muscle she did have on her body looked like it was wilting away. I could see the track marks up her arms. Not only was she a prostitute, but a junkie as well.

I glanced out the window of the hotel room and looked at her car; a blue Geo. Jesus, I haven’t seen one of those in a while.

Maybe it was a reflection from the lamp post, but an image seemed to move inside, maybe around the back seat. I did a double take on it, but after a split second I shrugged my shoulders to myself and continued on to the price menu. "So is there a dollar menu," I asked, sarcastically. She leaned back and laughed. She had a very deep laugh. It made me wonder if there was a penis under that skirt. It was probably from the constant smoking of the Marlboro Reds in her purse since around, I don't know, birth. If she smokes after sex, then the surgeon general may have to rewrite the warning label for her. "That's a good one," she said, "I haven't laughed like that for a while."

So, out of the two jokes I rambled off, you got the one about the fast food. That's just peachy. It's probably because that's all she eats. *Two all-beef patties, lettuce, onion, and that special sauce you like so much. You know what I'm talking about. The man gravy that is shot into whatever orifice that is provided...whore.*

"So, what if I wanted something more, let's say, unusual," I asked. She started to light up a cigarette with her pink, BIC lighter. She crossed her legs and thought about it. *Come on, this can't be the first time someone made this request.* After a moment she looked back at me. "Depends on what you want," she replied. I grinned at her and said, "I want to tie you up in the shower while it's running and bathe you." This may be the strangest request she ever had. I was waiting for a look, or a gesture. "That would be an extra fifty," she answered. "You got to be shitting me," I retorted. I can't believe that this is something that is not normally requested from a client.

"What," she said, "an extra fifty, that's the fee!"

"Why," I asked, "it's not like I'm asking to stick a funnel in your ass and pour Cheerios in it!" She shot me a look to help me get over it. It didn't matter. I wasn't going to pay her a hundred and fifty bucks anyway. "Fine," I said, caving in.

She nodded her head and headed for the bathroom. "Would you mind putting out the cigarette," I asked, "I mean, I am paying for this after all." She rolled her eyes to the back of her head. As she passed the sink that was outside the room with the shower in it, she threw the butt down the drain and proceeded into the bathroom. I turned on the faucet for a split second to make sure it was put out properly. She started taking her clothes off before she even passed

over the threshold of the bathroom. She started with her red skirt. Underneath she had a black thong on. *Nice ass at least.* I knew that I would be let down by the time she turned around. She proceeded to take off her blouse. I didn't want to look but I had to though. I had to make sure.

I started to face the mirror outside the bathroom. The one thing I love about these old motels is that every one of them around here was designed a certain way to make it easier to do my job. Each bathroom area has a sink, then a separate room for the shower and toilet. The sink area, for some reason, has a moveable vanity mirror on the one side, parallel to the door, and the window is always on the other side of it. This is great for my natural light needs.

I turned my eyes to the left to look at her neck and shoulders. Pale, she was so damn pale, and any indication of a mark would surely show up. I scanned her upper body as she stood naked, watching me.

“See something you like?” she asked.

Just then I had found them. The bite marks. They were toward the back of her neck. The “vamp stamp” was apparent, and I came out of my daze in a hurry. “No,” I said. Her eyes got big. “No!” she yelled, in disbelief.

“You're dirty, you need a shower,” I retorted. She grinned and proceeded into the shower. “I'll be right back,” I said, “I need something to tie you up with.”

I raced to the bed at a brisk pace. I threw down the sheets enough to get the pillows. I then proceeded to take off the pillow covers that have probably not been washed for a while. Now that I think about it, was that a semen stain on one of them? *I will wash my hands before I eat later.* I pulled at the pillow covers to make sure they didn't tear easily. While tugging on them, I was going over the plan in my head.

As I was walking towards the bathroom, I stared at myself in the mirror. I started to think, “*Jesus, I am a parody of myself.*” From the outside I have black hair, but I'm really a red head, like Marlene, but natural. I wear a lot of black, but that's just so I can keep up the image, the dark mysterious kind. I would love nothing more than to lay back wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a margarita in my hand and a cigar in the other. Or maybe a hula girl. I don't

really care if it's a real hula girl or one of the cheap ones that you stick on your dashboard, just give me something. I hate myself sometimes. I know what I do is right, but I wish someone else would take this burden upon themselves.

I looked to my left and saw "Marlene" starting to take the shower.

"Put your arms out," I said.

She stared at me for a second then realized that she was getting paid for what she thought was kinky sex. I took one of the pillowcases and tied it to the towel rack that was mounted in the shower and tied her right hand to the other end of it. As I shimmied to the left side, I took her other hand and tied it to the showerhead. I took a step back. *Shit, I left a footprint with the water! No matter. It's not like anyone will find her.*

"What now," she asked, while the water cascaded off her face and body. I stared at her fang marks. "You feel weak don't you," I asked. She looked at me then looked to the left. "Answer the question!" I yelled.

"Yes," she replied.

"You were bitten by someone, or in your case, something and you don't remember how or why."

"Yes."

"You sleep during the day with the blinds down and you wake up at dusk, don't you," I continued.

She gave me the innocent eyes. "How do you know that?" she asked. I sat down on the toilet and contemplated. Should I tell her before the sun comes up? Tell her that she isn't human anymore but suffers like one? It's cruel and it's not fair. It's not fair to have to do this, but this is who I am now.

I took a minute to watch her bathe. I watched the water flow down her body and drip from her buttocks and the cervixes where her legs met her vagina, and for a moment it was beautiful. Not the look of Marlene, but what she may have looked like in a former life. I looked at her face, all shrunk in, and her teeth rotting away from all the crystal meth she was doing. I scanned down to her arms and saw a red spot where gangrene started to form from the heroin. It was a sad sight. A sight that was probably very beautiful in her earlier years, before this wretched place got to her. Like everything else in this place, she also started going downhill. It's

not fair. It's not fair to be young and beautiful, and then life rears its head in while no one bothers to warn you about it. Marlene had it worse though. She had a client that infected her in more ways than one. I had always thought that vampires had a seductive side to them, but now I just look at them with disgust. Nothing is sexy about the ones I kill.

"I know a lot of things," I replied, "You thirst for blood even though you don't know what blood tastes like." "Marlene" nodded. "I'm going to call you Marlene now," I implied. She looked up at me and grimaced. "That's not my name," she insisted. I stood up and got close to her face. "You are not human anymore," I said, "whatever name you had does not apply to you." I leaned back and sighed. *This is the worst part.*

"You drank from a man that gave you a choice to live or die that night," I explained, "You chose 'life' for some reason. What you didn't realize was that he had the AIDS virus in him. Probably from when he was turned, however long ago that was. You are immortal, but at the same time have no energy because of the disease. You can't do all those nifty things that a normal vampire can do." Her eyes began to tear up. Deep down she knew that I was probably right. I can only imagine what she was thinking at the time. Maybe 'how is this going to end' or 'this is my fault'. They are both valid points.

"Now this is the part that will make you want to die," I said, "This whole time you have been spreading your legs for strangers for a whole hundred bucks an hour, you have also been spreading the disease to others."

She lost control of her legs and hung by the pillowcases that were holding her up. She let out a deep cry that you couldn't hear. The kind of cry that hurts you and your body because of the torment that you experience. The one where it doesn't want to come out and makes you choke on your own breath.

"I'm really sorry to do this to you," I said, while walking to the round vanity mirror mounted on the wall. "You have about ten minutes to think about your life, pray, or whatever the fuck you want to do," I continued. I tilted the small vanity mirror towards the window of the room, between the window and Marlene. It took Marlene a second to realize what was going on. Then the light bulb

clicked on when she remembered. In every vampire movie she had seen, sunlight kills a vampire.

“Oh God,” she whimpered, “OH GOD, HELP ME! HELP ME PLEASE! I’M SORRY! PLEASE...NO!”

“Don’t count on it,” I said, while I took the chair from the other room to place it in front of the bathroom so I could watch. That sounds awful. Watching what a person was once, die. I had to make sure that the deed was done though.

“God left you a long time ago, and there is no room in His kingdom for you anymore,” I finished.

I felt the heat of the sun’s first rays beaming through the glass. I heard a sizzling sound after that. I saw her arm start to smoke. *Here we go.*

“You son of a bitch, I hope you rot in Hell,” she yelled. The pain set in when her right arm detached itself from her body. *That whole sunlight thing is a real bitch.* I felt the heat from the mirror reflecting onto Marlene. There she was, hanging by one arm as her body turned to ash. I saw her flesh melt away and her breasts fall off of her. The yell got more and more faint. I could smell burnt hair now; that was always the worst for me.

After several minutes, all that was left was the pillowcases. One hanging from the towel rack and the other from the showerhead. The water was washing away all the flesh down the drain. The evidence will disappear along with that woman’s horrible existence. I watched as the skin smoked like incense when it burned, except, incense smells good. Whenever I do this I like to think about the monster and their previous life. How good could it have possibly been anyway? Was I doing them a favor?

I slowly stood up from the chair and went over to her purse and grabbed the keys to her Geo and the money out of her wallet. Wow, that’s amazing...a whole hundred bucks. “Christ,” I said, “I can’t believe I’m going to drive a Geo Metro.”

CHAPTER 3

I'm not vain. In my line of work you can't afford to be. I get my money from vampire hookers for Christ's sake. It's not exactly the March of Dimes, but that's the breaks. I get lucky sometimes and I find a woman with the vamp stamp, obliterate her, and take her money—if any. Sometimes I take hundreds of dollars, sometimes less...much, much less. But a Geo? Really? I've met hobos driving nicer mopeds. I don't think it would be so bad if the car wasn't the color of piss and vomit blended together.

I took Marlene's keys from her tattered purse. As I walked out of the hotel room I caught a glimpse of the morning sun. It's ironic. I preach how horrible it is for vampires not being able to look at the sun, when in actuality I myself don't find the sun that great. I'm nocturnal, just like them. Maybe it's because of my lack of options. I mean, I kill vampires. No, that's not right. I kill people who are about to turn into vampires. Does that make me a murderer or a savior? I try not to think about it too much because if I do, I don't think I would like the answer either. I'm not a hero and I never will be. I'm just a man with nothing else left to lose.

I opened the rickety driver's side door. I peered into the vehicle to take a look at what I was going to have to deal with. It was just as I thought it was going to be. It reeked of cigarettes. I took the keys out of my pocket and fumbled through them. It would be a good idea to get the hell out of here before the smell of burnt flesh ruminates all over the Shamrock Inn. "Apartment key, not sure, not sure...this might be the key," I said to myself. As I pulled the car

key from the rest, I noticed a silver crucifix hanging on the key chain. I stared at it for a second, trying to feel something, but I couldn't. I yanked it from the key chain and threw it in the backseat where a blanket lay covering something bulky, like a suitcase. Yeah, that was probably it, a suitcase...*dumb ass*.

I cranked up the car, which sounded like it was going to choke at any moment, but it started, thankfully. "I need to go," I said to myself, "There is nothing left to do tonight." I was tired and it was time to go get an egg and bacon biscuit from somewhere and go the hell to sleep.

I pulled out of the parking lot in the nick of time. I could hear the fire trucks coming in the distance. You may ask yourself, "How did I get the room, if you don't have cash?" That's not a problem for me. I just use the debit or credit card from my last save to pay for it. They never check ID's, just as long as you have one. Just flash it and they think it's correct. That's my means of getting my hotel room or my save point as I like to call it. Save point? That was just wishful thinking. Yes, when I eliminate a bloodsucker, I don't call it 'killing'. I call it 'saving'. I need to face the facts. What I do is not normal. Then again nothing about vampires is either. I need a little optimism in my life. This is hard work. Not the 'saving' part, that's a piece of cake. But the constant conundrum I face when I first look at them and realize that they are in some ways still human. That's the hard part. I need to think that there was a reason to it all. I need to feel what I'm doing is right. I need that. It's all I have left, and don't you dare try to take that away from me!

I'm sorry. I feel like I have to justify myself to, well, myself. It's time for me to go home, if that's what you want to call it. Not the home I inhabit now, but the one that will always be home to me.

I took the long way to get there. I used to live in the nicer end of the west side of town. It was convenient because it was close to grocery stores, video rental places, and the mall. Those were the important things to me. Food, film, and shopping areas. Of course there were other establishments like theaters and fast food places, but who wants to pay ten bucks to go see a movie anymore? I drove past these places with memories of how they once looked to me. Dingy and losing business, due to the area going downhill,

they were closed down now. *Maybe it was best that I lost my home when I did.*

The theater I went to on a regular basis had lost its glimmer. Now it was a dollar movie theater for the few that actually wanted to go in. The insides had gone to hell as well. The carpet was stained and the walls were filthy. The bathrooms were unspeakable to go into as well because when fungus is growing from the faucet spouts, it may be time to take some bleach to it. The screens inside some of the theaters were falling apart, only to be held up by duct tape where the screen was ripped. It was a sad sight indeed. No one went there when it was a regular theater, and now no self-respecting person will go to it for a dollar.

The mall had lost consumers due to a shooting that occurred there about a year ago. In this area of town, shoplifting and robberies became a normal occurrence. Staple shops that one would find in any mall were going away, and when that starts to happen everything starts following suit. It was a shame. The mall was one of the nicer ones in the state at one time. There was an expansion that occurred about a decade ago where it added another wing to the mall. This was a huge deal in this smaller town. *It should be since there is nothing else going on in the town.* This brought new shopping and consumers to the area. Kids and teenagers were dressing like the rest of the world, and the present was creeping up on the area that was lost in the past. That was the past though, and once again the city of Spartanburg has ceased to progress and crime is once again rising. *It's bad when there are security guards at the local Barnes & Noble.*

All of this was my reality at one time and now it has turned into a nightmare. Not for just me, but the rest of the population in town. People can't walk down the street without being harassed, and families have moved away from this place to find something better in Greenville or even somewhere in North Carolina. It's hard to say goodbye to a place that you call home, but maybe it's not just the area that's the problem. When someone looks at a place with a new set of morals and perspectives, things and people seem different. People change, atmosphere seems to differ, but maybe the only thing that changes is you, or in this particular case, myself. I am not the person I once was. I know too much now to go back and try for a normal life. I do have responsibilities to

maintain though, process to keep myself a sane and functional human being.

I drove up W.O. Ezell Boulevard, and stared off into the distance as the sun was about to rise into full view. On the way to my house, I took a right at the corner where the video store used to be. This route also took me to the last place that was still nice in spite of its surroundings. I took a left into a housing developed for families that are doing well in life, but not so much that they can live up the street in the area that only the rich can afford. It was a nice neighborhood still. Typical, but then again the people who live here don't want different in their self-created heaven. *I love how people think that bad can be blocked because of a reputation that says, "If you are different from us, don't bother."* That was the South though, "Don't you dare act different than us!" That may not be fair. That's probably the world for the most part.

I drove down the main street that connected all of the adjacent ones. Each house looked the same and lacked any real sense of style. This town consisted of more trailer homes than houses it seemed, not to mention houses without garages. The newer homes had garages, while the others had carports. *I don't know what I was thinking, trying to be like everyone else.* That's how we think I suppose. Always trying to keep ahead of others as much as possible, as if it will give us some sort of advantage in the end. *It didn't help me in the end.* I was almost to the home that I will always remember.

It was still early enough that I can get in and out and no one will see me. *They are still looking for me probably.* I reached the corner of Greenbriar Drive and Braesgate Lane and looked upon a house that had severe fire damage. While the outside was still appealing to an extent, the insides were gone and it's in the middle of renovation. *The homeowners were probably getting tired of the house being an eyesore and their property value dropping.* I pulled up to the curb of the charred house. I got out and walked around the car to step towards the mailbox. I looked to my right and looked at all the houses that looked like mine and noticed that most of them had a "For Sale" sign on their lawns. *I hope I didn't do that.*

I cannot tell you why I feel the need to do this at least once a week. Part of me wonders if it's some fleeting attempt to hold on

to something lost. I pulled out my wallet and rummaged through the money I had collected killing vampire hookers. *That sounds like a bad 1980's film, or a genius premise in disguise.* I found a five dollar bill crumpled up between all the ones. I took it out and straightened it. I opened up the mailbox and threw it in with the other bills I had stuffed into it over the last few months. *Jesus, why don't I just take back this small fortune?* "It's me keeping a promise," I whispered to myself.

I laid my head on the top of the mailbox. I wasn't sure if I was crazy or just tired. Probably both. This lack of sleep couldn't be good for anyone. I closed the metal mailbox with my last name on the side of it; Moxley. *That name doesn't have much of a meaning anymore.* I looked up with the notion that someone was watching me. *There was!* That blonde headed boy that used to come over and play was staring at me. *That kid was always hanging around Min. Probably kissing buddies or something.* In spite of my anger of an imaginary scenario, I waved my hand at him. His eyes got big and he reluctantly waved back.

There were probably a lot of rumors floating around about me within this neighborhood, but at least it seemed that this boy was ignorant to them all and still saw me as a regular man. He may be one of the last innocent kids around. There are only two things in this world that are innocent; children and animals.

I want a biscuit. My hunger took over my inner monologue and made me walk back to my car and drive off. *Yes, I know I talk and think to myself.* Trust me, I don't want it that way. I just can't help it.

The sun would come up soon, and that was my cue to disappear for a while. It was time to escape to somewhere on the complete opposite side of town. I did what I needed to do. I left her allowance where she could find it.

On the ride home I watched as the sun was coming up. The only thing I could wish for is that some of those creatures got caught in the daylight and turned to ash. I drove all the way to the other end of town to go to my depressing home.

I got myself the biscuit I was wanting. Craving, rather. The problem was that I couldn't drive and eat at the same time. I'm too concerned about traffic accidents. I'm like that with other people. Back when I was somewhat normal, I was a nervous passenger. If

I'm not the one behind the wheel, I'm not comfortable. I took advantage of the "oh-shit" handle above my passenger side window quite a bit.

I took the biscuit and hash browns out of the bag and headed up highway nine to go back home. I couldn't tell you to this day why I bothered to take the food out in the first place, but sometimes I wish I hadn't. It would have saved me a lot a grief in the long run, but grief was something I was used to.

As I was driving, I looked down at the passenger seat to make sure my food was not going to fall over. That's all I needed. I could imagine my food falling out of its containers onto the floor of an old ass Geo Metro. I'm not sure, but if I had a UV light at the time, there probably would have been cum stains all over the floor, or in the seat for that matter. "Great," I thought, "*I'm probably marinating in some guy's man juice right now. Do I even want to eat the food? I know it's in the wrapper, but still. I would give one of my nuts right now to have some soap or Purell. Anything that could sanitize my hands enough to enjoy my tasty biscuit and hash brown...where the hell did my hash browns go?*"

My food was missing. My entire paper holster of scrumptious hash browns went from full to almost empty in about five minutes. I looked on the floor board and all around the front area of the car. I looked in the back seat though the rear view mirror. "*The cross is gone,*" I told myself, "*The damn cross is not there anymore!*" Slowly, I pulled the car over into an empty parking lot where the local video store used to be. I left the car running so I could make whatever the fuck was in the back seat think it was just a stop light. I slowly reached my hands toward the blanket. There was so much that I was thinking.

"*Maybe it's a rat, or maybe another kind of rodent of some type. What if it's another whore? Damn it! I might have to ice another cold skin. Well, here it goes.*" I thought.

I grabbed a hold of the black fleece blanket and yanked it to the right as hard as I could. I had a bad feeling. A feeling that it would be something I would never begin to understand, something dreadful, something that I would never wish upon my worst enemy. It was all of those things. It was a prepubescent girl.

CHAPTER 4

I fumbled around my body trying to find my revolver as she quickly sat up. All I could see was her brown hair. It was a mess from the static that the blanket created over her. In fact, she was a mess in every way. I couldn't find my weapon. *Where the hell is it? I usually keep it behind my back!*

She just stared at me with her lips tightened like a child that just got caught eating on the new couch. I let out a deep breath, trying to calm down. "Who are you?" I asked very hastily. She didn't reply. She just had a dumb look on her face. Her mouth still tightened. I raised my eyebrows in disbelief that she might actually be mute. "You can talk can't you?" I continued with the fifth degree. I felt a headache coming on. I put my middle finger and my thumb to the side of my head, trying to make it go away. I had a wild theory that pushing on the veins on the side of my head could make the migraines stop. I turned back around and looked through the front window, keeping an eye on her through the rear view mirror.

"Do you have a name?" I continued. I could see her eyes looking at me. She opened her mouth and stuck her tongue out to spit out the hash browns that she hadn't finished. *Gross.* I just stared at her patiently until she was done. "You do have a name don't you?" I asked again, very nicely given the situation.

"Solstice," she answered.

What the hell kind of name is that? Well, it's different at least. "What's your last name?" I said, continuing with the interrogation.

She wiped off her raggedy clothes and replied, "I don't have one."

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

"Where are yours?" she retorted, sardonically.

"We aren't talking about me, now are we?" I growled. She cocked her head to the side and looked at me. "They aren't around anymore," I said, in hope of an answer from her. She looked at me then looked around outside. "Where are we," she asked in an awe sounding tone, like she had never seen a parking lot before.

"Answer my question first and I will answer yours," I told her.

She gazed at me with her piercing blue eyes. "That's not very fair!" she exclaimed.

"How do you figure that?" I wondered.

"You kidnapped me, and you think you have the right to question me?"

"Um, hello," I said sarcastically, "I had no idea you were even in the car."

"So that's my fault?" she replied, again sarcastically.

"I didn't know that you were there!" I shouted.

"So not only are you a thief, you are also ignorant," she replied. *This little bitch is going to make me resort to child abuse.*

I decided to throw my hands in the air, literally, and give up. There was no possible way that I was going to win this argument. Just like any argument I ever had with a female. I just leaned back in the seat and watched people go in and out of the grocery store. "Get out of the car," I said, very calmly.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I said so," I replied, "how do you like that?"

She gave a wryly smile, "I'm afraid you don't have a right to tell me to leave this car. It's not even yours...its Angie's."

I prefer not to know the names of my catch. Angie, huh? That was 'Marlene's' real name. "She was a whore." An infected, and had no place on this earth anymore.

"That's not true!" she yelled, "she was nice and she was helping me!"

I turned around. "I know you may be a little young to understand," I said, "but she was spreading a bad disease that hurt other people."

“That doesn’t give you the right to take them away from others!” she yelled.

“Get out!” I screamed, “I have a gun you know!”

She looked to her left at the seat and replied, “You mean that one?” She pointed down toward to my gun that was now in the backseat somehow. *How the fuck did it get back there?* “I took it from you when you weren’t paying attention,” Solstice replied, like she knew what I was thinking. I reached around to the back seat and grabbed it and put it next to me. I sighed and closed my eyes. *What should I do? She’s obviously homeless and has no one to go to. God damn it! I didn’t want this!*

I opened my eyes and she was next to me in the passenger seat. It scared the hell out me. “What the fu...,” I shouted while trying to stop myself from cussing. How in the name of hell did she move without me hearing it? *Why the hell should I care if I swear? She hung out with a prostitute. It’s probably not anything she hasn’t heard before.*

“I’m still hungry,” she said.

I shot her a look and said, “What the hell do you want me to do about it?” She peered at my biscuit and then back at me. She repeated the same glance. “I get it, I’m not dense,” I explained, “but there is no way I am giving up the biscuit.” Then it happened, the look. You know the look. The one where the eyes bat at you while staying big with a glazed look to them like they’re about to cry if they don’t get what they want. That’s the one.

“Fine,” I said, while throwing the biscuit at her.

“I knew you would see it my way,” she said.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“I would have run away while screaming ‘kidnapper’,” she answered.

“You wouldn’t have,” I retorted.

“I guess you’ll never know,” she said.

What the hell have I gotten myself into? This child was as innocent as one can get. She seemed different than the rest, like she knows more than an average child would.

“I don’t have a last name,” she said. I was taken back because I didn’t remember asking the question.

“What?” I said.

“My last name, you asked about it. I don’t have one. I know you are wondering about my parents. I don’t have any...at least not anymore,” she retorted. *I actually was. How did she know that? Well, I suppose that would have been the next obvious choice of questioning anyway.*

“This is a good car,” she continued, “it’s old but it never gave anyone any problems. Even Angie didn’t do bad things in here. It was safe for me. I never asked for anything from anyone. I just wanted someplace warm to hang around because I’m always cold.”

What a strange thing to talk about. I didn’t know what to say to that. I thought it was just a piece of shit.

“Anyway,” I interrupted, “here is the deal. We’re going to go back to my place and you are going to clean yourself up. I have a pair of extra clothes you can wear. Then, after that you can go be on your merry way and I can say I did my good deed for the day.”

She ate my biscuit contently then turned to me and asked, “Who would you tell that to?” *Well I guess no one. I hardly know anyone anymore. I really wanted that yummy biscuit.*

“Don’t worry about it,” I answered, “let’s just go.” I started the car right when the employee of the video store was pulling in to open up shop. *It must be nine in the morning. Man, I’m tired.* I started the car and quietly left the parking lot. It was time to go home.

I pulled up to my building in Wintersnow Apartments, and yes, that is the name of the place, I swear. It was a complex that was nice back in the day when they were built in the 1980’s. No major updates in the architecture have occurred since then, and because of that, the neighborhood is a drive by gang shooting waiting to happen. Theft and violence were becoming an issue. I have always been apprehensive about leaving my home at night, fearful that something of mine may get stolen. Then again, there was nothing to steal but some clothes and some ratty furniture.

I live in a studio apartment and pay a whopping three hundred fifty dollars a month, plus utilities. I have some milk, Gatorade, bologna, and white bread to eat. *Now that I think about it, I think the bread is moldy by now. I should go to the store soon.* It’s pretty much a room with no hallways. The only thing that has a door dividing it is the walk in closet and the bathroom. I was just thankful for the bathroom.

I pulled, rather, *we* pulled into the complex, and Solstice looked around in amazement at the trees and the people outside. There were kids waiting for the school bus. One was a boy. He had blonde hair and was very fair skinned like she was. She waved at him politely, and to her surprise he waved back. You would have thought that was the best moment that had ever happened to her in her life. Maybe it was.

She was wearing this beat up, old, black, long-sleeve shirt that had holes in it. Her jeans were tattered from so much wear and tear. Her shoes, well, they were British Knights. I didn't think they even made British Knights anymore. *Where did you get those? I would like to know so I can get a pair of some Reebok Pumps. You remember those? They were supposed to make you jump higher but they didn't. You just got them so you could push the little basketball and then the button to release the air. Good times.*

I parked the car and jumped out as quickly as I could. I started to run up the small set of concrete steps when I realized that Solstice was not following me. I turned and looked at her and raised my hands as if I was saying, "...the hell?" She retorted the same way. I rolled my eyes and went to open her door. I just figured she couldn't work the seatbelt or something to that extent, but it turned out that she thought she was a princess.

I opened the door and she hopped out of it with ease. "Why didn't you just get out of the car when I did?" I asked.

"I'm a lady," she answered, "I should have the door opened for me by a man."

I just stood still with my mouth hanging open. "That's real rich," I retorted, "you steal my food and you're in clothes that most hobos wouldn't even wear, and you're lecturing me about manners." She just giggled and hopped up the steps.

She stood, waiting right in front of my door, which was the second door to the right. *How did she know that? Lucky guess, I suppose.* I reached for my keys and looked for the one that opened the door. When I found it I was left with another obstacle. Solstice was right in front of the door like she was pasted to it, and all I wanted to do was to stick the key in the lock and turn. "You want to move out of the way so I can unlock the door?" She shifted herself to the side so I could get to the lock. I stuck the key in and

turned it to the right. *Wait, it's not going any further. Did I leave the door unlocked? Shit.*

I whispered to Solstice, "Wait here." I had the feeling that she knew what was going on. I turned the knob and tried to quietly open the door. I stress the 'try' part of that. The hinges squeaked loudly. My neighbors probably woke up because of it. *I need to get some WD-40 for that. Well, so much for my sneaky entrance.*

I looked around the apartment for any sign of an intruder. It's not that hard to do since it's essentially four white walls. The carpet was beige in color, which very well could be a lighter color, but there was no telling when the last time the carpet was deeply cleaned. I walked carefully with my gun drawn and pointing it at every little thing I thought was placed wrong. *Was that picture frame facing that way before?* My own paranoia was getting the better of me. This wasn't my first rodeo involving break-ins.

I pointed the gun towards my bed with the fear and hope that someone might be underneath it. Then it came to mind that it's just a box spring and mattress on a floor. *Wishful thinking based off of a previous life.*

I came inching around to the bathroom to see if someone was hiding in the shower. As I walked towards it I passed my closet. I removed the doors from the closet so I didn't have to go through the trouble of having to try to open it and it getting stuck. I looked at the floor of it with my peripheral vision. *All black shoes and some boxes...wait...I don't own a tan pair of suede Timberland's.*

I stopped and crept up near the closet door. I reached in and pulled out a Latino man screaming at me in Spanish. He wore a grey hooded sweatshirt. His eyes were glazed over and wreaked of marijuana. I slammed him up against the wall to the right of the closet, and stuck the gun in his mouth.

"Give me a reason not to blow your fuckin' head off!" The perpetrator's eyes started to water, as if he knew that he wasn't going to live another minute. He started talking with my revolver still in his mouth, still not speaking a lick of English. So to help speak the universal language of "You are so fucked," I opened the cylinder and poured out five of the six bullets it carried and slammed it back. I started pulling the trigger to scare him. I was playing a bad rendition of Russian roulette in his mouth.

Fuck! I can't shoot him. I will be looked for then for more than I already am. Wait, I'm probably looked for by vampires, not humans. It wouldn't make a difference. I could blow his head off now. The mouth would muffle the sound. Then I could dump his body in the woods.

“You could do that?” a girl’s voice came from above us, “but then they would trace the bullet back to you probably.” I looked above me and Solstice was sitting on the wall above us. She had a scared grin on her face. *Jesus, she sat there, defying gravity as we know it and didn't really care.* She was looking down on us from above, like a fly on the wall. I slowly took the gun out of the man’s mouth and we both looked up at her.

In unison, the words came out of our mouths... “What the fuck?” If this were a television episode, this is the part where we would go to the credits screen. She glared at us with an innocent, yet creepy stare. Her knees were up to her head like she was watching a movie and a scary part was coming up.

“If you kill him, he will never see his unborn son or his high school graduation that he thinks won’t happen.” she said, “This is Donald; he’s a senior at his high school. His girlfriend is Carmen. She’s very pretty but could cut down on the makeup and the whole drama queen thing. Donald thinks that he won’t be a good father or good at anything because he’s Mexican. Got news for you guy, our President is black. I think you may have a shot in life.”

Both Donald’s and my eyes met in disbelief at what we were witnessing. “Now this is the part where you let Donald go, Gavin.” she said. *How the fuck did you know that?*

“There a lot of things that you don’t know about me,” she answered. *Shit...she's a vampire! Crap! Wait. Why can she walk in the light? You are a vampire?*

“I’m something else,” she retorted.

I let go of Donald. He said, “No amount of jail time is worth this bull shit!” *That was convenient, I thought. You don't know English one moment, but when you're let go it comes pouring out of you.*

“Get the hell out of here before I change my mind.” I said. He just stared at me. “Did you hear me?” I asked, “get the fuck out and take care of your life.” He stumbled over himself to get out,

but eventually ran out the door. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

There was a news story I read the other day where a recently widowed woman answered the door for a stranger asking questions. She politely told him to leave because the stranger was making her uncomfortable. He made a fuss and left the home. Two hours later, the stranger came back with a friend and proceeded to break into the woman's home with her two kids inside. The woman called 9-1-1 and told the dispatcher that someone was breaking into her home and asked if she could kill them. The dispatcher told her that they could not tell her to do that, but that she could protect herself and children. The woman took out a shotgun and blew one of the intruder's head off with it. What a place we live in where we can kill for someone being in your home uninvited.

That's what I wanted to do...blow that damn Mexican's head off.

"That was a close one." a voice came from behind me. I looked around quickly as a reflex and saw Solstice behind me.

"Jesus Christ!" I yelled, "you scared the shit out of me!"

She smiled all cute, like a porcelain doll. "Don't be afraid of me," she said.

I walked towards the bed and sat down. "Don't do that appearing at random crap anymore!" I exclaimed, "I don't like it." She nodded her head at me and started to walk towards me. "Just stay there, please," I said. *Please? What the hell is going on?*

I lied down, tried to make sense of what just happened. Never mind the fact that I almost blew an intruder's head off, but rather the wall clinging girl that liked to jump from place to place. I sat on the mattress and put my head between my legs. I could feel her staring at me. I looked up. She wore a half smile as if to say, "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to find out this way...oh well."

"There are towels in the bathroom and some clothes in a box in the closet. Go ahead and get cleaned up," I said. She nodded her head and headed towards the closet to pull out the box. The box was old. Old to the point that the bottom was getting ready to fall out because of getting wet so many times, and moved around from place to place. This isn't the only place I have lived. South Carolina is where I grew up, it just happened to be the place I came back to.

Solstice opened the box slowly, as if she found the Holy Grail. I bet she heard harps and a choir singing ‘Halleluiah’. The box had “Dana’s Clothes” written on the side. *I haven’t opened that box in a couple of years. I almost forgot about it. Why did I almost forget? Jesus, I almost forgot. How could I forget? Forgive me. I’m so tired.*

I fell backwards as Solstice went through the clothes. I could hear her say things like ‘cool’ and ‘oooh’ while I fell asleep.

I slowly let my eyes close, and had one of those naps where while you’re sleeping you’re fully alert to every little noise going on. It’s not a good nap, but it’s what I was used to. Come to think of it, I don’t think I have had a whole eight hours of sleep in a long time. I started to have a little dream. Flashes of my old home came to mind. The kitchen with the tile floor and the bar area that wrapped around it was the same. I could see family and friends hanging out around it, talking and joking. They tipped their glasses of booze to me when I walked around them, and all of them smiled.

Then something happens to that image, like my dream is a television show and someone just changed the channel. I could see static in my mind like it wasn’t coming in well enough. Kind of like a thunderstorm knocking around my internal cable.

Suddenly I was walking up the stairs calling for someone. *I’m home and no one is around. Something isn’t right. Hello? What’s going on? There was music playing in the background. It sounded like a children’s music box to help them sleep at night.* I start to run up the stairs, but the stairs just get longer as I run up them. *Someone is messing with me. I just want to find my family!* I stumble up the stairs. I stop and take a breath and look up. *I can see the top! There’s the guest bedroom. Okay, gotta go!* I run up the stairs at full speed and reach the top. I hear yelling from my daughter. *Daddy! I’m here. Help me please!* I run to my wife’s and my room. I open the door. *I’ve seen this show already. Can you please change the channel? Please? Not now! I already know how it ends!* I hear wind chimes in the background. Everything gets quiet and the chimes get louder. I can feel the sun beaming on my face.

I open my eyes to awake from my never ending nightmare.

Solstice is outside on the balcony looking around. The light beams around her body. I can see the auburn in her hair. The light makes her blue eyes brighter. She's wearing a blue long-sleeve shirt with a black skirt, and has a pair of black boots that come up around her calves, with black stockings underneath that have roses embroidered on them. *Dana always dressed too adult for her age.* The wind chimes are coming from the building next to mine. She looks at me but doesn't smile or anything. She reminded me of my daughter. She wasn't though, and I knew that. She was something else. *Is she trying to hear my thoughts? Maybe she is.*

She cracks a smile and says, "You need to stop watching so many movies. Not all vampires glimmer in the sunlight." *Thank God for that at least.* There are two things in this world that are innocent, children and animals. But what if the child is the animal or if the child is a creature?

CHAPTER 5

Later that day, Solstice and I had to have a little heart to heart chat. I had an old wooden table and a couple of chairs in case I actually had some company. The table was round and made of a very light wood. I had it from a previous life, which I don't really care to share at this point. We stared at each other for a solid five to ten minutes before one of us mustered up enough courage to speak. I always thought that vampires stopped aging at the point they were turned. There was no telling how old she was. She very well could be older than me.

"Can I have something to drink?" I tilted my head to look at the refrigerator. "I don't have any 'A' negative blood," I replied. She curled her lip at me. "For your information, I don't drink blood," she retorted. I raised my eyebrows at her. "There's some Coke in the ice box," I told her. "Ice box," she said, "What time era are you in, the fifties?" She got up quickly, but not as fast as she could have, and skipped over to the refrigerator.

"Don't drink blood?" I asked, "What kind of vampire are you?"

"Do you have any drinking glasses?"

"In the cabinet above you to the right," I answered, even though she didn't bother to answer me.

"There aren't any," she said. I then realized that I haven't been home long enough to wash any.

"The only ones I have are in the sink," I told her. I heard the fumbling around of dishes.

“Have any that don’t look like something might be growing in them?” she asked sardonically.

“Just take the scrub brush and clean one out.”

She walked back into my sight with the brush and said, “Have a brush that doesn’t smell like last week’s trash?” I couldn’t win with her.

“Take it or leave it,” I responded, to her wiseass remark.

“I think I’ll make do,” she said. Then she looked back in the kitchen and said, “Wait a sec.” She ran back in and opened the cabinet. “You have some Dixie cups,” she told me. That was news to me. I heard her twisting the cap off the bottle of water and pour it into the paper cup.

“Ok, Gavin, if we’re going to make this relationship work, we need to set some ground rules,” she insisted.

I looked around the room to make sure there wasn’t a live studio audience laughing at us. “You’re joking, right?” I asked.

She sat down and leaned on the table. “Nope,” she replied, “we need more food and drinks.”

I put my hands up to get her to shut up. “There is no relationship to be had here,” I explained, “I told you that you could get cleaned up and then be on your merry way.”

She sat back in the wooden chair with a smug smile on her face. “I can help you,” she said. I admit I was intrigued with a proposal from an adolescent girl.

The sunlight was beaming in through the sliding glass door blinds. It was beautiful with an orange like color on the walls. When you looked outside, you could see that the sun was starting to set and the sky was orange and the clouds were pink. *She’s kind of lucky to be able to witness things like this given her circumstance.*

“All right,” I said, “I’ll bite. What is it you have in mind?” She took a sip of her Pepsi and smiled.

“I can lead you to other people that have the disease like Angie had,” she told me, “The ones that are ready to turn that is.”

I put my hands on the back of my head to ponder. “How can you know that?” She gave me a serious look and started to explain.

“Everything on a body has a scent, even blood. I can smell the disease on a person. The only thing is that I can’t tell the difference in a human and a vampire. That’s where you come in and look for

the marks. Your problem is that you only look for them on the neck. You don't look on the hand or the thighs. Everything emits a scent, even hair," she explained, "In fact, why do you dye your hair black when it's red?"

Shit, my secret is out.

"Don't worry, I won't tell," she said.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"How do I know that is true?"

"You don't, you'll just have to take my word for it. I still age like a normal person, for now anyway," she explained. There was a faint smell of a lie in the air that ruminated out of her mouth.

"What is it you want in return," I asked.

She stood up out of her chair and walked toward the sliding glass door. "All I want is some food and a place to sleep," she said, "I don't agree with what you do as far as the money goes because that's stealing, but I understand the reason why you do it other than that."

Well, thank God, I was worried I had to justify myself to a twelve year old.

I went to sit down on the couch that was facing the sliding glass door. "How can you be able to walk in the daylight?" I asked. I thought that was a very fair question given the strangeness of it, then again hunting vampires with AIDS isn't exactly normal either.

An uncomfortable silence encumbered the room. I felt sort of bad asking, but it was unique anyway you looked at it. "My mother was a regular person and so was my father for that matter," she started to explain, "When my mother was pregnant with me, she was bitten by a vampire. She lost so much blood that she was rushed to the hospital so she wouldn't die. She died anyway during transport, but I was saved." I regretted asking that question, but since it was answered already, it wouldn't hurt to ask another.

"Where is your dad?"

"Not sure. He's probably dead. Most of them prefer to keep the females alive."

"I'm sorry to hear that, how do you know that though?"

"Other vampires told me," she answered, "apparently I am somewhat of an urban legend."

I thought to myself for a second. *This girl is too unique, there is something that she is hiding; there has to be.*

“There is,” she said, “Others are looking for me to study me and my ability to be a day walker.”

I knew it.

“Stop doing that mind reading thing,” I told her. She shook her head to stop what was probably habit.

“Sorry,” she replied, “but I can’t help it, I can’t stop it.”

I stood up and paced the room. *I can’t do this! I had a good thing going on. Then this little ankle biter had to fuck it up!* I stopped and looked at her. She had the most innocent face that a child could have and I tried not to look. It just made it harder on me. “I can’t take care of you, I can’t even take care of myself!” I yelled, “I live alone, and eat off the dollar menu at any place that has one. I sleep all day. I have no friends to turn to. I don’t have anything to offer you!”

She continued to look out the window. Outside it was getting darker. “At least you get to eat,” she said, “I just want to be a little more normal than I am now.”

I sat back on the couch and put my head in the palms of my hands.

“Just think of it as a business arrangement,” she muttered. *She may look and age like a child but her mind is much more mature than that.*

“This isn’t a good place,” she said to me. I was taken back on how she could change the conversation so fast.

“What do you mean,” I asked.

She stood still in the threshold and began her speech. “This was a place of love and understanding. This place is also a place of heartbreak and remorse, and what stands out more is the man who used to live here. His name was Edward. He was a teacher, and a lover. His girlfriend was pretty. They made love whenever they could. Edward was a good-looking man, but more than that. If he had talent in it he could have been a model or an actor, but he wasn’t. He was an English teacher, and all he had were his words,” she said.

I listened intently like it was a mother reading a story to their child. “His girlfriend, I think her name was Christine, was a retail worker at a popular clothing store. She was beautiful as well.

Christine told Edward that he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. That wasn't a lie, but it was a truth that didn't matter in the end. Christine started sleeping with a man that modeled the clothes that she sold. He was good looking as well. In agony, Edward lost himself to alcoholism and depression. If he couldn't be Christine's trophy man, then he would be no one else's. Edward died in the apartment ten years ago. He overdosed on prescription medicine for his depression and cheap wine from a box that you can buy at any grocery store. He died. He died because of his own vanity. This is not a good place and we should go somewhere else."

I had my hands up to my face in a praying like pose. I didn't know what to say to that. The story seemed to have too much detail to be made up.

"I just know things," she continued.

I don't want you knowing things about me. I just want to be left alone.

The sun was now set and the night sky came out. "You know what I miss more than anything?" she asked.

I shook my head. "You're the mind reader, not me," I retorted.

She turned around and looked at me and said, "Stars. I miss the starry night sky. I never see any stars at night anymore. If you see stars in the sky then you know something good has happened. That's what I believe anyway."

I took a moment to think about what Solstice had just told me. "You know what I miss?" I asked, "I suppose you already know the answer to that."

She smiled and said, "I would like to hear you say it."

I stood up, ready to go to bed and said, "Happiness, I miss seeing people happy." I started walking towards my bed. "Good night," I said, "We'll talk more about this in the morning."

I went to sleep that night for the first time in a long time, and I actually had a dream. I dreamt that my wife was with me in the bed laying her arms around me. The night breeze made us relaxed and she kissed my neck to try to wake me. I told her that it was late and that I had to be at work in the morning. She didn't care. She just kept on trying to seduce me. I squirmed in bed thinking it was real. I saw my old bedroom in the way that I will always remember it; at night and nicely decorated. Everything in the room was blue when

I left it. Of course the bedroom accessories were different colors. The walls were a neutral tan color, and the bed was wood with bed sheets that were different shades of red squares divided by brown lines. I lay down with my wife in my dream and that is what it was. A dream and nothing more. The room started to shake and the walls began to crack. My body rose up to see the damage that was happening around me. The vases and lamps started to crumble to ash and the cracks in the walls were starting to bleed. I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes to shut out anything that I didn't want to hear or see.

I woke up in a daze. It was still the middle of the night. It felt like she was still cuddling me, but it wasn't my wife. It was a little twelve year old who made herself at home. *I am the last guy to look after you. I have nothing to offer you.*

She shifted herself closer to me and she muttered, "That doesn't matter." I don't know if she heard me or if she was dreaming. One way or the other she was innocent looking when she slept, so I left her lying there, even though I didn't sleep at all.

CHAPTER 6

“Wake up,” I said, while throwing a brown towel at her, “you’re too young to start this moody teenager sleep until one in the afternoon crap.” She moaned and waved her hand at me, signaling me to go away. I stood there and waited for it to sink in. *That’s right. Take a whiff of that towel. I know you can smell it better than most.* There was a faint sound of a sniff that came from her. She laid up straight and shouted, “Oh, my, God! That’s disgusting! What did you do, wipe your butt with that?”

I laughed at her. I needed that. I haven’t laughed like that in a while. “That’s what a real man smells like,” I said, while laughing.

“Then where’s the man at,” she replied.

I held my side like I was aching in laughter but it was meant to be sarcastic. “You’re so funny,” I joked, “where did a half-breed learn to have such sharp wit?” Solstice shrugged her shoulders as if it wasn’t a big deal. It really wasn’t. I was just trying to spark a conversation.

“Hungry?” I asked. Her eyes got big and it seemed as though she was speechless. “Come on,” I gestured, “let’s go to the Pancake Hut.” She nodded her head in approval, and shot up out of my bed, ready to go. I stared at her appearance for a minute.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m not a fashion expert,” I said, “but could you at least run a comb through your hair?”

She stared at me for a second like she didn’t know what a comb was. “Oh, yeah, hold on,” she said. She made her way to the

bathroom. "I'm not a cleaning expert," she said, "but could you clean your toilet so I don't have to look at your track marks?" I couldn't believe what I just heard. No twelve year old should know the term 'track marks' in reference to one's bowel movements that land in a toilet, much less use it in a sentence. "Do you always have a comeback for everything?" I asked.

"Don't dish it out if you can't take it," she replied. She hopped out of the bathroom and yelled "Ta-da!"

Holy shit, she just said 'ta-da'. I thought only magicians used that term. "Um," I started to say, "You shouldn't use that term unless you do something amazing." She frowned in thought. She had something to say. I knew it.

"Sarah says that I'm amazing as I am, and that I can use it whenever I want," she said. I opened up the door and gestured for her to come with me.

She started to cross the front door threshold when I asked, "Who's Sarah?"

She nonchalantly told me, "Sarah is my friend that talks to me sometimes. She has feathers."

I just nodded my head in agreement. *I guess someone who has been alone for so long needs to make a friend somehow, even if it's imaginary.* We walked along the sidewalk that led to the parking lot where the piece of shit Geo was.

One of the neighbors was walking their dogs along the main road. Solstice's eyes grew big as she looked over at the dogs. "Hi puppies!" she yelled in delight. Right then, the dogs stopped in place and started to bark and growl at her. One was a German Sheppard and the other was a Black Lab. The hairs on their backs were standing straight up, and they were both showing their teeth.

I chased after her once I realized what was going on. She just stood there looking at them. The owner was trying to pull them back and kept on repeating, "I'm sorry. I don't know what is wrong with them". I knew what was wrong. They thought she was evil. I didn't see Solstice's true colors until that moment. She got angry, but not so much at the dogs but more at herself. She just wanted them to stop barking. She showed her upper teeth and her fangs came out. They weren't long or big, but they were noticeable nonetheless. *I hope the owner didn't see her fangs. That would be bad and hard to explain.*

I picked her up and dragged her to the car while apologizing to the dog owner. She kept demanding that I let her go. I got to the car, threw her inside, and slammed the door. I walked around and got into the driver's side.

"I didn't do anything wrong!" she screamed.

I tried to talk to her like a normal human being, but she wouldn't let me talk. It was like I was married again. I finally got fed up and grabbed her face pushing her into the seat. My face got close to hers, which wasn't a good idea in retrospect. I shouted, "SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT YOUR GODDAMN TRAP! HAVE YOU LOST YOUR FUCKING MIND? DO YOU REALIZE WHAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED IF SOMEONE SAW YOU SHOW YOUR FANGS? DON'T EVER SHOW YOUR FANGS IN THE DAYTIME! DO... YOU... UNDERSTAND?" I knew there were probably people walking by or looking out their window at me. *They already think I'm weird anyway, what's the big deal.* "NOW," I continued, "YOUR GOING TO SIT DOWN, YOU ARE GOING TO PUT ON YOUR SEATBELT AND WE ARE GOING TO EAT SOME FOOD! YOU BETTER NOT SAY ANYTHING UNTIL WE GET THERE... Do you understand?" She nodded in agreement with my hands still clamped on her face. I let go and started the car. *Did I just tell an immortal to put on their seatbelt?*

We drove out of the complex and made a right onto the main roadway to get to our destination. There was an awkward silence in the car. I drove about three miles up the road and Solstice just sat and looked out the window. I felt bad. I forgot how to talk to a child. Maybe I just forgot how I talked to my own. I felt a 'sorry' coming from her at any moment. I thought that there would be some remorse in the situation from one of us. I stopped at a stoplight and it came, but not the gesture I was thinking.

"You could have just said 'please'," she said. I just rolled my eyes back into my head and slammed my head against the steering wheel.

We drove into the parking lot of the Pancake Hut and parked close to the door. With what I do for a living; if that's what you want to call it, I get paranoid that I may have to make a fast exit. We got out of the car and made our way to the front door.

When we walked in, there was that twenty-five cent toy machine that disperses a worthless piece of plastic. Solstice just gazed in wonder at what could be inside the little plastic balls, and what she would get if she put in a quarter. We waited to be seated like everyone else.

It wasn't incredibly busy in the restaurant since it was a little past noon. Let's just say we had brunch. The snotty hostess showed us to our seats and threw our menus down in front of us. When she walked away from us I looked at Solstice and said, "She was just a bucket full of sunshine wasn't she?" I laughed at myself, but Solstice didn't get the joke.

"What can I get?" Solstice asked.

I just paid attention to the menu and answered, "Get what you want." I don't even know why I bothered looking at the menu. I always get the same thing, pancakes and sausage links. *That sounded really good, especially with syrup. Not just for the pancakes but on the sausage.* Solstice giggled to herself. I looked up to see what was so funny.

"Grand Slam," she said, "that was a nickname for one of the girls!" I was almost afraid to ask because I thought I knew the outcome to the conversation.

In a dry voice I asked, "Why did they call her that?" *Go ahead, it's because she gets nailed a lot by dudes. I get it.*

"I don't know. I just thought it was funny that it was on the menu and that was her nickname," she answered.

Well, that's a relief. I guess I have a little faith in humanity left.

It was then that I needed to get down to business. "Listen," I said, "we need to talk about tonight and what the plan is."

She looked up and asked, "What's the plan, captain?"

"Don't call me that," I said.

"What should I call you then?"

"I don't know. How about just using my name, Gavin?"

I reached in my pocket and pulled out a photo of a hooker that I have been keeping an eye on for about a week. The photo was crumpled up, but not so bad that someone couldn't recognize the woman in the picture. I handed it to Solstice and she stared at it for a minute.

The picture was of a slightly over-weight blonde that actually gave a crap about her appearance. Now that I think about it, she

was almost Vegas class hooker material. She had on black boots that came up to her knees, and wore a dress that came up a little too short for comfort. *Solstice is wearing boots kind of like that. I'll have to change that soon.*

Solstice's eyes got big like a light bulb came on in her head. "I know her!" she exclaimed, "That's Beth. This was taken before she dyed her hair brown, but that's her though. She was kind of mean."

I took the picture back and put it in my pocket. "So you won't mind that I'll have to exterminate her?" I asked.

"You shouldn't say 'exterminate'. Say something like 'free'. If you say that, then it will sound less like you're killing bugs," she said, with a sad undertone. I looked at her face and saw how uncomfortable she was with this.

"You hung out with these people for a long time. Are you not upset that I'm 'freeing' them?"

She took a sip of her complimentary water and shook her head. "It's not like any of them were my best friends or anything. I have Sarah for that. They were alone in a way like I was," she said, "It's not exactly like I liked them a lot. It was just a lack of options."

I nodded my head, showing that I understood.

"It's sad that this terrible thing happened to them but I get why it needs to be stopped, even if they are innocent in some way," she continued.

I looked at her with my eyebrows frowning and said, "They were not innocent. Anyone who uses their body for money is not innocent. They spread disease whether or not they were bitten by the vamp with a disease in his or her bloodstream. Only in this world can people call prostitutes innocent. It's disgusting. Don't feel sorry for them. They did this to themselves. And quite frankly, they probably didn't give a shit about you, so don't feel bad for them!"

I leaned back in the booth and took a breath. I wasn't sorry for what I said. I believed in it, and I think deep down Solstice did to. "What can you tell me about Beth," I asked.

She looked up in thought and retorted, "Her name is Velvet, and she likes to hang around the nice hotels in the Spartanburg area. Mostly the new one that was built a few years ago. You know the one, the unnecessarily big one downtown."

I knew of the one she spoke about. “Her nickname is Elephant Ear,” she continued.

I kind of cocked my head at what she just told me. “Elephant Ear, like singular not plural?” I asked. She nodded her head. “Why that name?” I asked, while I sipped my coffee.

“Because she has a big loose vagina,” she said.

I choked on my coffee and spit some of it out. I didn’t know whether to be shocked, laugh, or be disgusted.

“Angie said it was because she got slammed by so many guys...”

I put up my hand while trying to catch my breath. “I get it, you don’t have to go into detail,” I explained.

“She also said that if she were to walk around naked she would leave a snail trail,” she said, “but I don’t know what that means.”

The people that sat across from us whipped their heads around to look at us. “Hey, how ya doin’,” I said to them. They turned back around to mind their own business. “Well, it’s a good thing you don’t know what that means,” I said.

“What does it mean?” she asked.

“I’ll explain it to you when you get older,” I replied. *When you get older? She’s not my kid? She’s a goddamn freak of nature!*

I had an epiphany just then, “Is there a house they all hang out at?” She looked at me to answer, and just then the waitress came by to take our drink orders.

“My name is Melanie and I’ll be your server today,” she said, “what can I start you off with?” I looked Melanie up and down. The uniforms at restaurants nowadays are too conservative. What happened to the dress that was the one piece uniform that came above the knee? It’s just not the same anymore. I guess it creates less sexual harassment in the workplace. Why does everything have to do with sex now? Prostitutes, well, they’ve been around for a while before the disease. Sexual harassment, a man or woman can’t make it through the day without groping someone? Sexism, you can’t hold the door open for a lady anymore without one bitching at you about how they don’t need you to do it. I’m only thirty years old and I already miss that time. *When did things get so fucked up?* I looked Melanie up and down again and looked at her ass.

They make waitresses wear khakis or black pants. She decided to go with the black pants. *Nice choice. They fit around your ass very nicely. Ugh! I'm turning into the very cliché that I have been bitching about. Damn, am I that fucked up too?*

"I'll have a coffee," I replied. She glanced over at Solstice. Solstice was concentrating on the menu so hard she had her tongue sticking out. *I wonder if she has ever ordered from a menu before.*

She looked up at our waitress, "What's good?" Right after she said that I put my hand up to my forehead in embarrassment. To my surprise, Melanie was very kind to her and not judging her like a teenager like any other employee might.

"Well," Melanie the waitress said, "I like the chocolate milk the best." Solstice gave her a serious look and asked, "It's not the same kind they give you at a school cafeteria is it? I don't want that. My friend told me that it tastes like ass." I laid my head on the table, either from embarrassment or just trying to keep her from seeing me laugh.

Melanie giggled for a second, "I think your friend is right. I have the good kind, so do you want to try it?" Solstice nodded and Melanie the waitress walked away with our drink order. Solstice smiled as she walked off. "You should marry her," she said to me.

I looked at her, "Now why the hell would you say something like that?"

She looked at me, still smiling. I could almost see where the fangs started she was smiling so big. "She's pretty, you like her ass, and she's nice," she explained.

Oh, for the love of God.

"I think you would have pretty babies, and a nice home," Solstice continued.

I stared at the menu and felt my blood begin to boil. "Please stop," I asked, but she kept on going.

"I can see a nice fence around your house," she said.

"Please," I said again.

"Probably in one of those houses that looked like all the other ones in the area."

"Stop"

"I've never really liked those. There was no personality to them, not that I would know. I've never been in one."

"Please...stop."

“It would a nice place to have a family one day.”

At that point I snapped. Something inside of me made me see the past, which I don't like. My family and old friends' faces were coming at me like a bolt of lightning. I couldn't handle it. I slammed the menu closed and got close to Solstice's face and I quietly yelled, “Shut up...shut up! I don't care about things like that anymore! You have no idea what it's like to have a loved one or a family, so shut...the...hell...up. Next time you bring this bullshit up I'll stake you through the heart! Do...you...understand?”

Solstice stared at me as tears started to fill up her eyes. She nodded her head and kept the tears from dropping down her face.

Why should I care, she's not human anyway.

She sat back up from her cowered position. She turned her head to me. I opened the menu back up to try to get my mind off what just happened. “What happened to you?” she asked me.

I gave a deep breath and replied, “Something you would never understand.” *If you know things, shouldn't you know that?*

Maybe she did, but at the same time didn't know what true loss was to a person. Scratch that, true loss of a human being. She wasn't human. She never would be. Maybe I haven't left her on the side of the highway yet because I feel sorry for her. I can't feel that way. No human attachment. That was a rule for me. It clouds logic and judgment. “I'm sorry,” I said after a moment. I turned my eyes to Solstice to see if she would respond.

She stared at her menu and didn't look up when she told me, “Why should you be sorry. I'm not like you. What would I know.”

I didn't know whether or not to be relieved or to feel bad. What the hell was I doing? I was ultimately forming some kind of bond to this...thing. It went against everything I believed in for the last couple of years. She was getting a good meal out of me and that's it. After that, she leads me to the other whores, and then she's on her own.

I proceeded to look at my menu. I think I wanted the club sandwich on toasted white bread. *Yes, that is exactly what I want. Don't want to get full. I need to be nimble for the job tonight. A whorehouse is where I'm essentially going. Should be pretty lucrative. A lot of whores equals a lot of cash. Yes, the pickings will be good.*

“You know what’s funny about you,” Solstice said, interrupting my thought.

“No, but I have a feeling that you’re going to tell me,” I replied.

She took her eyes off the menu and looked me dead in the face. I thought she was going to pull some vampire voodoo and try to make do what she wanted or something. I’m not even sure that’s real. I just saw it on television.

“You talk about how inhuman I am and how vamps need to die because all they do is kill for their own pleasure,” she said.

I didn’t actually say that.

”You’re not any better. Killing people based on something they might do. You’re like Jack the Ripper only with a reason. You’re just as much an animal as the people you kill. People who, by the way, have no control over what happens to them. And then you take their money. You’re like a glorified thug in a way.”

During the conversation, I looked away from her and grinned. “You know what Jack the Ripper and the Zodiac killer have in common?” I asked. She didn’t shake her head because she knew what I was going to say. “I don’t get caught doing it, and the difference is that I’m doing it for the good of human kind. Something that you would probably never understand.”

Melanie came back to take our orders and interrupted the turmoil that was happening. “You guys ready?” she asked. I proceeded with my order of a club sandwich and lemonade. Solstice, after debating with her thoughts consistently, ordered the house salad. I thought that was an odd choice for her. She didn’t strike me as the veggie type. Melanie took our menus and went to type them into the computer behind the counter.

There was an awkward silence, and then Solstice turned to me. “What, were you expecting me to order a steak extra bloody?” I’ll give credit when credit is due. She was a real ball buster. She probably learned that from the women she lived with. “The red in your hair is starting to show,” she said.

I put my hands through my hair as if I could feel the color coming back in from my dye job. I told her I would be back and went to the bathroom to see for myself. As I got up from the seat I could hear her say, “What an ego!” Sure enough, when I got to the bathroom there wasn’t a trace of red on my head.

I could imagine Solstice laughing at me back in her seat. *That's fine. I'll get the last laugh when it's all said and done though.* I came out of the bathroom and had a sarcastic grin on my face as I walked back to the booth. Solstice was giggling to herself, trying not to make eye contact with me. I couldn't be mad at her. She was still a child wanting to pull a practical joke. I sat down and took a deep breath. "Laugh it up Fangy-Mcgee," I whispered to her. I have to admit, she had a cute laugh.

CHAPTER 7

Damn it all to Hell. It was still early and I had more time to kill in a day than I have had in a long time. My “job” is pretty dedicated to the night. Trust me, I would love to do it in the day but most pros only work when the sun is gone. I like the night. It keeps my face hidden from people so I can do my slaying without too many people being able to point me out in a line-up, not that it would ever come to that. Most of my work ends up as ash or sometimes mush. It all depends on how far the person is in the transformation.

If an individual is in the early process of turning, then they don't carry the gene that makes a vampire turn into ash. Some part of them is still very human. These are the victims that hurt me the most. It would be one thing if they disbanded into nothingness. Marlene was that way. She fell apart like melted ice cream. That's probably not the best way to put it. The best way possible is to say that she will never be identified. That's why I take any belongings they carry on them.

This is not normal. Let's face reality. This type of vampire activity isn't normal. Under usual circumstances, when a vampire feeds, they can keep the person alive if they want. More times than not though, they kill them so they don't leave witnesses. If they're kept alive for some reason, the puncture marks heal and they can go on with their normal lives. No infection, no turning.

This case is different. Somehow the vampire infection and the AIDS virus are wrapped together. When these infected vampires feed, the bodily fluids from them seep into the human and the

human is then forced to turn into a vampire. It's beyond their control. This is not normally the case. To turn a human into a vampire, a human must drink the blood of one. This is how it has always been, and it hasn't changed in centuries. Whoever started this epidemic knows of his condition and how it affects others. This is a conspiracy.

But it doesn't make sense. Why would a vampire and its constituents want to turn everyone into one of them? That's just starting an epidemic of famine in their world. No humans, means no more food for them and they all die out on their own, or at least become the closest thing to a corpse from being weak in body and mind.

These thoughts plagued my mind on a daily basis. I didn't even know what was going on in the world anymore. I used to have my finger on the pulse of entertainment, at least as much as one could in South Carolina. Now I look at the attire I sport on a nightly basis; one black overcoat, a black button up shirt and pants. They say that clothes make the man, and if that's the case, than I'm a poor man with leftover work clothes and maybe a polo shirt in the catacombs of my closet in my furniture-less apartment. Any indication that I had another life disappeared in the fire...ahem...sort to speak.

My clothes smell. They probably don't in reality. I wash my clothes on a daily basis since this is all I have. The smell I refer to is the stink of rotting vampire. I'm not sure what death really smells like since I have never smelled a human corpse, but the stank of a vampire rotting is now burned into my septum and will never leave, at least as long as I keep on with my current lifestyle.

Solstice sat in the backseat, anxiously waiting for what we were going to do next. It was still early and I had no idea what to do with a young half-breed girl. I would love to say that we went to the park and had ice cream and played all day long, but those days of thinking that life is made up of cute puppy dogs and good times are far away. The cool thing is that Solstice had been sheltered for a while, at least as far as I knew. No matter where I go, it should be a new experience for her. What's going to make a little girl happy? What's going to entertain her more than anything on a cold winter's afternoon? Why, the electronics store of course!

Since the local mall is losing business to ignorant gang bangers shooting inside it, it seems that the mecca for consumerism is just a mere five hundred feet away at the 'Electronics Zone'. This is the place that defines this generation. Movies, music, televisions, computers, games, stereos and speakers, and kitchen items. This place could make a grown man orgasm in his pants, and it's the only successful thing left in this town.

It was busy. What the hell was I expecting it to be? It was about a week before the holidays. Wait...fuck it, Christmas. I got into a habit with my career in the wonderful soul-sucking job of retail to say 'holiday' instead of Christmas because corporations feared getting sued by someone who didn't celebrate Christmas. These were probably the same assholes that bitched at their neighbors that decorate their house with a nativity scene. Anyways, it is what it is, or was, and that time has passed so I am going to say whatever the hell I want.

I pulled into a vacant parking space way out of the way because I had no patience with trying to find one up closer to the entrance. I took my seatbelt off and hopped out of the Geo.

I reached behind the driver's seat and pushed up on the lever that makes the seat go forward so that Solstice could get out from the back, but of course it wasn't that simple. The seat wouldn't move forward, so instead of trying just to pull the small lever up; I had to pull it and beat on the seat until it moved. I could imagine the looks I got, people watching me cussing out the back of a driver's seat.

After the driver seat battle of the year, I finally got it to move forward. I just hope it moves back. Solstice climbed out of the mess that was the backseat. I watched her get out and noticed that her outfit didn't fit her the same way it did when we left the apartment. Like she grew another inch from the time we left until now, which had only been a few hours. She stared at me as I rose up from my bending position. She knew... she knew what I was thinking, again.

I shouldn't have been surprised. It's one thing knowing that these things had potential for gifts, but it's different when you're subject to it for a longer period of time than the usual slaying that takes all of thirty minutes, if even that. I chose not to ask what she

was staring at and just keep on going with the task at hand; looking at things I will never afford but can dream about all the same.

It was a silent walk to the entrance of the electronics mecca for men, and probably women, in the Upstate area. As we approached the sliding glass door entrance, you could smell the testosterone in the air. The smell of desperation and want lingered. Movie geeks racing for the new edition of a movie that has already been released on DVD two times before, the panting of a man getting a new flat screen LED television just because his neighbor just got one; but make sure it is bigger than his or you can't brag about it. Then it continues with another neighbor of a friend competing for something more than you have. It's a vicious circle in the normal community...normal to me anyway. Yes, the scent of testosterone filled the air, but I think it was from all the new loss prevention people guarding the sections.

Jesus Christ! Have things gotten that bad that they needed to hire extra muscle? It's happened. The one place I went to get away from life's little burdens has finally become part of the downward spiral that is the Upstate. I suppose that it's ignorant to think that things will stay the same and that this town is not any more special than the next. But it's hard seeing the way things are now from a social standpoint after living here for about two decades. Everything is one big stereotype.

The first place I go to is the movie section. I like to see what's new in the film world. There are many things that I don't do anymore, but I will watch movies until my brain can no longer soak in the knowledge. That means that I look at everything; the film, the director, actors, producers, etc. I'm one big brain filled with useless knowledge to most people, and it would take a lot for me to quit this part of my life. 'Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria!' I can give up video games and reading books, but not the films...please God, not the films.

Solstice and I reached the films. Any child her age would make a run toward the animation section, but she clung on to me like she was making a new discovery. I browsed the sections to see what had come out new, and old, and there it was. Like God was shining a light on it just for me, and the cherubs surrounded it while a children's choir was singing in my head. It was beautiful, and I had

to have it; the Ghostbusters Collector's Edition with outtakes. Don't judge me.

"What is that," I heard Solstice ask. The sound of a record scratch came into mind, like in the comedy where something wonderful just got interrupted. The cherubs I saw in my head just caught fire, and the children's choir went off key while the light faded away from the box.

"You don't know what a movie is or just this one in particular?" I asked. I hoped to God that she didn't know what a movie was so that this could be easy to digest.

"I know what a movie is," she said, in a valley girl like disgust, "Just not that one."

At that moment, I had a picture of my head exploding in my mind. I grabbed the case and brought it down to her level for her to touch this piece of genius. "This movie?" I asked again.

She looked at the front and back of the case, "Yeah, never heard of it." She never...wait, never heard...I can't even think right now. What the hell? This movie comes on television all the time! How could she have not seen the edited version at least? She is around twelve years old! No excuse.

"Just so that I can wrap my head around this," I said, "you never even at least heard of it?"

She stopped and thought about it. "Yeah," she replied, "it just sounded dumb." The muscles in my face gave away and had no retort to what she just said to me. How...it's four guys catching ghosts with lights that come out of a fictional weapon. How can that not be cool to a kid!

"You're killing me smalls," I replied.

At that point, a young man came through the entrance in a rush. He came in with a black hoodie on and faded jeans. At first thought, I would have said that we were about to be robbed. Instead, he made a dash for the bathrooms. He had his hand up to his face like he was trying to conceal something from people. I'm not sure if it's just habit to pick up on these things, but I saw some of his skin that his hand couldn't cover. It looked like boils on his face with a hint of red surrounding it.

Out of instinct, I walked toward where the young man was going. Solstice put the movie back and followed me. If I knew,

then she knew as well. I had forgotten that I had her with me as she followed.

“Where are you going?” she asked sternly. I stopped and looked back at her. I then realized that I was in the television area. Just sit her in front of a television and that will keep her occupied for a few minutes. I took her hand, which was very warm and guided her to the new 3D television that cost a third of a middle class American’s salary.

“Here, put these cool glasses on,” I said while putting the huge 3D glasses on her, “and watch this cartoon movie.” I’m not sure what movie was on, but I can almost guarantee you it was a computer generated film with the celebrity voices, is there any other?

I walked away and watched to make sure that she wasn’t following me. She’s doing what I told her...good. I arrived at the corridor that contained the men’s and women’s bathrooms, as well as the employee break room and offices. It was a man I saw, so I took the obvious choice and flung open the men’s bathroom door.

I knew the pain that he was omitting. I’ve seen it before; the boiling of the skin, and the red tint. It was a trait of a vampire being exposed to the sun.

I heard him breathing, gasping for air. Not because he couldn’t breathe, but to help keep himself calm. I let the door close behind me and locked it. “Get away,” he said. I walked toward the first bathroom stall after the urinals. It’s funny, no matter what, if we feel a bit ill; the first place we go is the bathroom. The dirtiest, nastiest place is the place we go to try to feel better.

I saw him with his hoodie down. He looked like he was a college kid, judging by his attire and how he carried himself. “Get away man. I don’t think I’m safe to be around,” he stated. He turned to look at me. He had some facial stubble in the shape of what was supposed to represent a goatee. His brown hair was parted in the middle and was long to the point that it came right below his eyes. He was scared, and his face looked the same.

I put my back to the wall and slid down to a sitting position on what was probably an unsanitary floor. I looked to my right and saw a window with oversized shutters, like the ones made of hard plastic that they had in your school restrooms. I knew what had to

be done. I just hated that it would have to be in the day and in a public area.

“When did you get bit?” I asked.

He looked at me surprised. “How did you know?” he asked.

I contemplated lighting a cigarette at that point, but that would draw more attention to the area and situation. “It doesn’t matter how I know,” I retorted, calmly, “it just matters that I know.” I leaned my head to the right to help relieve my neck. In these types of situations my neck starts to hurt, which causes me to get migraines and I don’t need that right now. When he moved his head I saw the puncture marks on his neck which were almost fully healed.

“My friends thought that it would be funny to hire someone for my birthday,” he explained.

I got infuriated by the notion. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Ryan,” he said, “Ryan Nelson.”

I nodded my head to him, like I approved of the name. The reality of it is that I usually forget them in a couple of days. Marlene’s name is slipping my mind and that wasn’t even her real name in the first place.

“So Ryan, your so called friends got together and bought a diseased filled hooker for your birthday. They seem like real winners. The worst part is that you went along with it.” I went over with him.

Ryan put his hand in the air and tried to stop me from talking, “I didn’t know until after the fact. They made it seem like it was a casual encounter.” That just made things worse for me. This poor guy was a victim of his shitty friend’s attempt of a gift.

“Why didn’t they just hook you up with another student or something?” I asked.

He looked down at the tiled floor and told me, “I’m not good at it, at talking to them.” I assumed he meant females. This was the hardest dilemma. At least before it was men and women who knowingly went into the transactions. This just seemed wrong and unfair. The fact of the matter was that Ryan was getting close to turning.

“You should leave. I’m afraid that I’ll hurt you,” Ryan explained. I just continued to sit and watch him. His face was healing and his mouth was ajar. The reason why his mouth was

open is because his jaw line was hurting. His fangs were growing in and keeping his mouth shut hurt him because they were touching his bottom lip as well. Until they're fully formed and curved inwards, they'll hurt his mouth. There was no doubt that his thirst was beginning.

“Do you know what’s happening?” I asked.

He turned around and started shuffling his body towards me. “I have an idea. I’ve seen the movies and read the books. I think I am becoming a vampire.”

I moved to the right and let him sit next to me. “I’m sorry that this is happening to you,” I said, “It’s not fair to you, it’s unfair to carry this burden. Especially when you didn’t realize what was going on in the first place. It should have been your asshole friends. I feel for you. I really do.” I got up off the floor and looked at him in all of his pain. The only gift I could give him was a way out in an even more painful way.

“However, you are what you say, or at least will be in a few minutes. I have to do something now and you will either hate me or thank me, but I think you’ll thank me.” I said wrapping up my speech. Ryan watched me go to the window and put my hand on the rope that opens the shutters. He nodded his head at me, ready for the pain he would have to endure for at least thirty seconds.

He approved of this. This was the first time anyone was willing let me do this. No tying down, no wooden staked or high-powered halogen lights. It all came down to natural light. And when I pulled the rope and the sun came in the bathroom, I watched Ryan get punished for having sex. If that isn’t a story to tell your children about sex, than I don’t know what is.

His body caught fire immediately. It started at his feet and spread to his upper torso in mere seconds. He didn’t scream or yell in pain. He sat on that nasty tile floor watching me watch him die. This is what my life has come to, watching people die. The fire reached his face and he didn’t make a sound. His mouth moved and I watched it tell me “thank you”.

I had to leave quickly. I jumped over Ryan’s burning body and bolted through the door. The smell was already drawing attention to the area and myself as people watched me speed walk through the corridor out to the main floor. I went to find Solstice in the chair watching the 3D movie. She remained still, watching the

movie without the glasses, just watching a fuzzy screen. Her eyes were filled with tears as I grabbed her hand and told her, “We need to leave.”

She kept up with me as the security started making their way to the restroom. There was no one at the exits, so it made for a cleaner escape into the parking lot. I could feel Solstice dragging behind as I pulled her away from the store.

“You’re hurting my arm!” she yelled. I didn’t have time for her whining. I pulled her close to me and picked her up so that we could make a faster get away. She started crying and begun hitting me with her arms and feet. I pulled her away so I could see her face. As the tears were rolling from her face, she was slapping mine. “YOU ARE HORRIBLE!” she yelled. I tried to block her hands with my free hand.

“STOP!” I yelled. “What the hell is wrong with you?” She wiped her eyes off and started to weep while talking. “I’m sorry, but I had to do it. It’s what he wanted,” I explained.

“NOT THAT YOU MORON! YOU JUST LEFT ME BY MYSELF AND ANYONE COULD HAVE GRABBED ME! THIS WASN’T PART OF THE DEAL! YOU LEFT ME FOR BAD GUYS TO GRAB ME AND YOU DIDN’T CARE! YOU ARE A HORRIBLE MAN AND PARENT! YOU DESERVE WHAT YOU GET BECAUSE YOU ARE SELFISH! I HATE YOU!”

It never occurred to me that she was still a child for all intents and purposes. She wasn’t mad that I killed Ryan; she knew it had to be done. She was mad that I left her alone, and she was scared. I forgot how to be a human being. I forgot to be a Dad. God, how could I forget? I put her in the front seat because I couldn’t get the damn seat to work. She rode with me through town on the way to my...*our* destination.

CHAPTER 8

Why is it so hard to say ‘goodbye’ to someone or something that you haven’t known that long. You’re born, you grow up, and you get married and have kids, all the usual stuff. That was my general impression of what I thought my life was going to be. I met my wife, Megan, in a mall during the holidays.

We were both looking at the Pepperidge Farm stand that they usually put up in every mall from late October until the end of December. You know the place, the sausage and cheese place. Anyone that goes there and makes a purchase is usually getting it for someone that’s not family and not a good friend either. Usually it’s for the in-between people that you like, but not that much, hence the sausage and cheese with crackers package comes into play. Everyone knows this but will never admit it. I received many unhealthy presents from that stand in my time. I don’t mind being the guy you like but not enough to spend a lot of money on. In fact, many of my Christmas dinners consisted of that savory pork product with some mustard on the side.

I was usually alone on holidays. I didn’t have any family and hadn’t for a long time. My family died when I was sixteen, both my parents. I didn’t have a sibling because of my mother’s hysterectomy when I was seven. My dad was in retail and my mother was a house wife for the most part. She held some part-time jobs when times and money got tight.

I saw how my dad was in the line of work he did. He was angry a lot of the days he worked, but nice to be with when he wasn’t. I

told myself that I would not go the route of retail again and I haven't yet to this day. Then again, I didn't think I would kill people before they turned full vampire.

There's a sort of a relief being on your own, but at the same time a certain despair that comes with it as well. One of the problems I had was that I didn't know how to relate to people. I spent so much time working on my own survival that I kept other people away from me. I worked in mill factories most of my life after my parents died. I hated it. There was nothing wrong with the people or the work. It's just that there was nothing or anybody to relate to. I was more into the arts whereas others were just into drinking and cars, things like that. I loved movies and books. That's just how I was. When someone lives alone and has no part of the outside world, nine times out of ten they probably use film as their entertainment for themselves. I'm not sure how many times I watched "L.A. Confidential" or "Ghostbusters". More times than is necessary I'm sure. I realized this when I started reciting the movie while I was working just to keep myself entertained.

Every day was the same. Work, go home, and watch a movie while eating a dollar pizza I bought at the local supermarket. It's actually quite sad and kind of embarrassing. If I died and someone found me, when the cops searched the place all they would find is an empty refrigerator with one-dollar pizzas stacked to the brim in the freezer. How embarrassing. No real food, just frozen dinners. Come to think of it, I don't think I had any chips or snacks either. That was my life, pathetic and alone.

In 1998, I went to the film, "Titanic". I had already seen it before and I couldn't tell you why I went back. I was always glad that I did. That's the first date I had with my wife.

Megan was not a stone cold fox, not like an actress in Hollywood. She was cute. She wore glasses with thick rims, like a librarian might wear. She had the long auburn hair that you could trip over. She wore clothes that may have come from Hot Topic, if that store was around back then. Not the black stockings or anything like that, more like the movie t-shirts that you usually found on-line or in vintage stores.

We went to the theater and sat in the middle row. The good spot. *Man, I was in my own world back then.* Megan liked playing

games during a movie she had already seen. In this case she wanted to try to count how many gasps there would be when the ship actually hits the iceberg. I liked playing the parody game.

For instance, in my mind, what would happen if the DiCaprio character let the Winslet character jump off the boat in the possible suicide scene? Not only that, but what if DiCaprio just pushed her off instead? I guess I think about things as if it were a Mel Brooks comedy spoof. I would just laugh to myself. That laugh is what got Megan's attention. When that scene occurred, I laughed.

Megan turned her head and smiled and asked, "What's so funny?" I cocked my head towards her and told her the image I had in my brain. She replied, "Like it was a spoof movie!" From there we continued to joke around during the three hour film. Then the scene happened. The unsinkable ship hits the iceberg. Megan said, "Wait for it!" she had a very excited tone in her voice. Her head poked up to look around the theater.

There were several gasps that came from the audience. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...and...eight," she counted.

I wasn't sure what she was doing so I asked, "Eight what?"

She leaned her head towards me and told me what she was counting and why. "Why the hell are so many people surprised when the ship hits the ice? It's *only* in the history books," she explained. I saw her point and why it was so damn funny.

There are certain things a person should know from our history. First, the Titanic sunk because it hit an iceberg, and second, the assassinations of major historical figures. Third, that George Washington was the first president. I'm sure there was more than that, but I'm not here to write a history book.

Towards the end of the flick came my personal contribution. *Set up scene*, when the two lovers are floating in the freezing water and Jack is about to die. The woman says and, I do quote, "I'll never let go, Jack", while holding his hand.

A few seconds later, a rescue boat comes around looking for survivors. When the female lead sees this, she shoves the now dead love interest's hands away from her and he sinks. That, to me, is the most unromantic thing that happens in this "romantic" film. Just watch it again; you'll see what I mean. Anyway, I pointed this out to Megan, and she laughed because she never realized that before. Her laugh was infectious. When she laughed others

laughed, even if they didn't hear what was so funny. *I kind of dig this chick.*

The icing on the cake was when the movie was over and the lights came back on. She rose up out of her seat at the same time that I did. Low and behold the greatest thing anyone could do, the compliments to end all compliments. Not even God could hold a stronger presence. *Okay, he probably could.* Megan had on...wait for it...a 'Ghostbusters' t-shirt. Not just one you can pick up anywhere nowadays. I'm talking one from 1984 that looked old and worn to the point where the symbol, which hugged her breasts very well, was coming apart. This was vintage, and vintage is sexy.

"That's an original shirt, isn't it?" I asked.

She looked at me for the first time with her green eyes and replied, "Yeah, my dad got it a long time ago and never wore it, so I took it from him."

Women with old movie apparel make my pants tight.

We walked out of the theater together. I think we were the only ones that were holding a conversation, while everyone else in the theater was recovering from the shock that the Titanic sank. *That was sarcasm by the way.* "I'm afraid to ask, but do you have any other cool stuff like that at home?" I asked.

She kind of grinned at me and replied, "Well, if you like this shirt, then you might dig my original 'Ghostbusters' poster signed by Murray and Akroyd."

Holy shit! Put your seats in their upright position. I think I collapsed a little bit. She laughed at me a little. I'm not sure if she was nervous or if she was actually into me. "You may be the perfect woman for me," I said.

She just laughed again and said, "Well, I'm not going to marry you, but you can take me out one night and we can discuss why, for whatever reason, Citizen Kane is the greatest film of all time."

That means she thinks it sucks too! That was the moment I knew I had found my wife.

Things weren't always perfect. I'm not going to paint the picture of a perfect home life like movies do. *That's usually called a montage.* I did get my act together. We bought a house in the suburbs, no picket fence though. We had a room dedicated to our stupid obsession with film and a huge shelf with DVD's, all in

alphabetic order. *Yes, we were anal.* We both had jobs that we hated but we were happy when we were at home.

We got married in a court of law with no one there but some friends and family, mostly hers on both counts. Her brother was my best friend.

Allen is a doctor. He was the pride of her family. He went to college, had the nice home and car. He was my friend because he also had the same kind of sense of humor I did; kind of sick and perverted. We would consistently act like we were gay for each other. We only did it because it made us laugh, but it made other people chuckle as well. I don't get to see him as often any more.

After the marriage ceremony, we thought the next thing to do was to have a child. So we did. What most couples know, but will never admit, is that when you're trying to conceive there's no more fun in the sex. Foreplay is out the door as far as a woman is concerned. It's more like "put it in and do the job". The man just has to shut up and take what he can get. She was either very fertile or I have sperm of steel, because two weeks later she was pregnant.

The nine months were very up and down. I think that I was somehow emotionally and physically synched to her. When she got bigger, I got fatter. When she cried, I cried after she was done. Only I did it in my own little area of the house, namely the bathroom. It's weird how the little things like that happen with other people. I never understood why women who don't know each other, but worked together, got their periods at the same time. *Weird.* If you told me earlier in life that women's vaginas could synch together like a bunch of wireless routers, I would tell you that you're crazy. *What the hell do I know?* I didn't know that I would fall in love with a person that I had only known for two seconds either.

Dana was born October 16th, 1999. She was the smallest thing I had ever seen. I'll never forget the day I made her smile for the first time by making goofy faces. She could only sleep if she was watching something on the TV for the first few months of her life. She was so curious about everything. She loved watching me play video games, nothing too violent though; mostly Mario Brother's games and Banjo Bear games. Yes, we were a family of geeks and there was no hiding it.

Nine years past us by in a blink of an eye. Dana looked like me but had her mother's personality and her auburn hair as well. I guess she got that from both of us really. I keep forgetting sometimes that I have red hair. It's been dark for so long that I don't think about it. I guess Solstice's little prank about my hair made me think about it. I guess it made me think about all of this. *I don't like to think past this point. I need to get going now. I have whore vampires to take care of.*

Megan and Dana died on a Tuesday about a year ago. They were victims of murder. I found them when I came home. Their bodies were severely mutilated, especially their throats. *Goddamn it! That's it! I'm done! I have to go now, back to the task at hand.*

I walked out of the bathroom and looked at Solstice and said, "You're a real riot," in a sarcastic way, "I thought it was funny," she said, while I was driving down the road

There it was, the Geo, the shitty Geo Metro. Every time I look at that piece of shit it makes me realize what my life had become. I'm doing the right thing, right? I'm trying to get rid of evil and trying to stop a disease from spreading to others. *Yeah, that's a good thing I'm doing. Maybe they'll write books about me or even a movie.* There goes my ego again. I need to get my mind back in check. This could be the end of everything I've been working for. This could end tonight.

CHAPTER 9

I'm not going to lie about it because there is no sugar coating it. This is how I feel about myself. Call it twisted or disturbing, whichever you like. I'm shallow. *I know, big shocker.* The only thing I could think about on the ride to downtown was that I hoped that nobody I knew saw me driving that piece of shit. *Beggars can't be choosers.* I know the irony in that. A guy who doesn't make a living at all has a lot of room to talk. In reality, I was lucky I was driving anything at all. *You stole it asshole.* The only thing I could think of at the time was, 'Why couldn't the hooker drive a Honda?'

The Geo has a dark interior. It might have been grey but months of chronic smoking and not cleaning the upholstery may have made it darker than it was. Hell, the seats could have been white for all I knew. You could see where the cigarette burns ate up the seats because someone didn't flick the ashes out on time. *Jesus.* To add to the wear and tear, there was a CD hanging on the rearview mirror. *It must be hard being a cliché.* The actual compact disc player wasn't working because someone couldn't figure out that when a CD doesn't want to go into the player, it means there's already one in it. *So...let's just jam this son of a bitch in and it should definitely play. Ignorant.*

The back seat was covered in old magazines and napkins. The magazine colored covers had bled off the page because water or some other substance was spilled on it. The Entertainment Weekly with the Harry Potter kids on the cover was now down to two faces

because the girl's face was no longer there, just the body. I guess for a pervert, that's all they would need. *I don't even want to know what the Kleenex was for. Probably someone's cum rag. Some loser spunking all over himself and his beer stained shirt, reaching in desperation for something to clean up with. How disgusting.*

Solstice and I were riding down Main Street towards downtown. All the shops and clubs were still open. The one thing that always bugged me about downtown was the amount of stop lights. Every time I had to stop I fought not to look at the college kids, parents, couples; gay or straight, and all the shops they came in and out of. Life's not great in general. The only things people have are the tiny strings of great moments to hold onto. I think that's how people survive nowadays. What happens to a person when there are no more happy tiny moments? Do they disappear into the crowd? Do they fade from the memories of others in time? I wanted to be like those people walking up and down Main Street, just to have another tiny moment to hang on to.

The same places I went to during school were still there; the hot wing place, the club that had all the great local bands where high school kids went to attempt to drink. The great, independently owned breakfast nook that college kids drove to just to get rid of their hangovers, and the floor above them that had apartments for rent. You know the ones. The ones that have letters on the door of each one and not numbers because that usually meant they were shit holes. It was hard for me to see families walking down the sidewalk or out of a shop. *It was just one more reminder.*

Solstice had an anticipated look on her face. As we went riding through downtown, she was fascinated about the apartments that were on top of some of the older businesses. She looked from my side of the car to her side, looking for something important in these old buildings. She placed her hand on the glass and stared at a brick building, looking upwards.

"What is it?" I asked.

Solstice took her hand down from the window and shook her head. "Nothing," she started, "it just feels like I have been here before."

"Like when you were with the hoo...women of the night?" I asked.

“No, more like something that I remembered before I even knew who I was.” That whole answer seemed cryptic and vague. There was something about this girl, besides being a half-breed.

Solstice didn’t say anything else on the way there. She was holding her stomach like she had a bad meal at the restaurant.

“Do you have to fart?” I asked. She gave me the stink eye. *Come on! That was sort of funny.*

“No,” she said, “That was pretty gross, and what do you care anyway?”

I actually took the question to heart. *Why did I care?* “Never met a kid who didn’t like gaseous humor,” I replied.

“In case you forgot,” she said, “as you put it, I’m not a kid.” This little girl confused me. She didn’t yell at me or cock a huge attitude. Most ‘close to’ teenage girls I ever knew always had the ‘I know everything attitude’, but not Solstice.

She just made her voice heard and let bygones be bygones. *That’s actually kind of infuriating. I wanted her to yell at me. I want to have an argument with someone. It’s been too long.* Maybe she knew that already. If her mind was a betting table in Vegas, no one would attempt to blow their cash on it. It was probably next to impossible.

Her apparent ache did worry me. *I don’t want her puking blood in the car. It’s already in dire need of a detail.* Her hair looked fuller now that she ate something. I could see a little curl to it instead of the rats nest I saw when I first met her. There was a little more color in her complexion. A hint of red in her cheeks, I thought. Maybe it was drinking blood that did it. I knew kids that ate too many yams and their cheeks turned orange. *Just a thought.*

“I’ll be fine,” she said, “let’s just get this over with.”

When she said that, I just had another epiphany. ‘I’m about to deprive her of the only people she knew’. What does that make me, a hypocrite? *No.* These people; regardless of their morals, were not going to be human anymore. *I am doing the right thing.*

I’m saving hundreds if not thousands of lives in the long run, despite if it’s the AIDS virus they are spreading or the fact someone could be their dinner. The problem that started plaguing me more was what to do with Solstice when everything was said and done. Part of myself told me to deprive her of life. *What life?* What else is there? Finding another group of degenerates? That’s

no life for a child, vampire or not. *Whatever the hell she is.* Then, there is the other part.

The father in me wanted to play it out and see how things went. *Jesus, what the fuck am I going to do? Raise her? Put her through college? Can I look forward to her getting married? Probably not. How about kids? Probably can't have them.* There was nothing around anymore for me to look forward to. *I have too much hope left in me.* I'm trying to fill this void in myself but its easier not to feel.

"Then that makes you just as inhuman as the creatures you hunt," someone or something said in my head.

Holy shit! That hurts! Get out of my head! SOLSTICE! "GET OUT!" I yelled. The pain was unbearable. I could feel the veins in my head grow and pulsate. My eyes felt like they were going to explode. *I took my hands off the wheel and placed them on the back of my neck. The car started to swerve. I dug my nails into my neck. I could feel the blood trickle down my neck and my back. I started to peel the skin off of me. Eventually, I would be able to feel my skull and hopefully pick out the pain from it. I could feel the flesh tear. The car swung to the left into oncoming traffic. I didn't care. I could see the people fleeing for their lives. Veins started to snap apart. The blood was no doubt on the seat.*

The pain stopped. Oh. Shit. I feel better now. It may have been from busting a vessel. I put on the brakes. I gasped for air. Then put my head on the wheel. It didn't matter now. The blood loss would surely be the reason I die right now...Solstice, the little bitch. Her being here was a reflection of my own hypocrisy. I looked to the left and saw her. She had her back to the door with her knees up to her face, grinning. I couldn't say anything, what would be the point. I'm done with this. I didn't think it would end like this. Killing myself by self-mutilation. Her knees came down from her face. Her eyes were black, like a kitten that wanted to play. Her pupils were that big. Her smile had grown bigger. It was horrible. Her fangs were out and oozing saliva. She didn't blink. No. She wouldn't. No! In a blink of my eye, she had attached her fangs to my neck. I could feel her tongue scrapping inside me. "That's right, you can be scared. I like the taste of you when you're scared." I could hear the car horns in the background as I died.

“Jesus Christ!” I screamed, when I came back to reality. The horns were blowing for me to put on the gas because the light was green. I started to drive with my right hand on the wheel and my left checking my neck for injury. Solstice just stared ahead. “What did you do to me,” I asked harshly.

She turned to me and told me, “I just put a thought in your head. The rest of that shit you were dreaming about was you.”

“How do I know that?” I yelled.

“I couldn’t come up with crap like that,” she explained, “that was screwed up.”

I just stared at her blankly. “Don’t worry though”, she continued, “That happens to everyone the first time.”

“Which part?” I asked, “The excruciating migraine, or the fucked up dream?”

“The headache,” she answered.

That was more than a headache.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“What the hell did I tell you about that?” I yelled, “Stop getting into my head!”

She looked out her window, hoping to ignore the situation. But just like females, she had something to say. “I can’t help it sometimes,” she explained, “I try to stay away from people because of that reason. All the thoughts that people have just come flooding in. The funny thing about it is that you make us seem like the horrible creatures, but ‘normal people’ are just as sick and depraved.”

I had a feeling I was going to regret the next question, but I had to hear a twelve year old school me on humanity.

“How is that exactly?”

“You all think you’re so superior to others, but the truth is you all are screwed up. I hear the thoughts of rapists, perverts, child molesters, killers, robbers, sociopaths, lawyers, murderers, people who like bestiality, psychopaths, bigots, and people who want to kill other people because they are different. And the only thing you worry about is vampires. Tell me, who is the fucked up species?”

I had no argument.

“I was once told that if you’re not part of the solution, then you’re probably part of the problem,” she continued. I smirked at her.

“What?” she asked, not realizing my point. So I had to emphasize it.

“I guess I’ll be part of the solution to this vampire problem then,” I replied.

CHAPTER 10

I'm not sure what I was expecting to see when I pulled up to the house. Part of me was expecting to walk in and see a madam in a push-up bra with girls lined up in single order fashion like what you would see in a western. The idea of a black man with a white three piece suit and a cane lined in jewels came into mind. The terms 'bitches' and 'hoes' would come into play at some point. I thought there would be some music playing in the background; some Barry White or something to that extent.

Solstice and I pulled up to the curb right outside the house. The house, at one point, was white with blue shutters. It was probably very nice at some point in its life, but now the paint was peeled, shutters were falling off, and the grass was as high as one's knees. The weeds alone looked like they could come to life and try to nip at you.

When I looked around the neighborhood, I saw that it too had gone to hell. There were occupants in the other houses, but I would guess it consisted of drug dealers and drug addicts. I knew this because when we pulled up I could see the occupants step out on their front porches and yards to look at us. *Did they know?* It was like they knew what we were going to get ourselves into before we did, and that there was some sort of conspiracy about a vampire cover up. *They know but they won't say anything.* I could understand that. Who would believe you?

The little bit of daylight that was left in the evening continued to linger. You could see the sun over the horizon getting ready to

hide under the plains. *We need to do this quick and get it over with.* As the sun fell, the residents fled back inside their shit-hole homes. I stepped out of the car. The car door squeaked. Let me rephrase that, it howled. The car door made such a racket that I wouldn't have been surprised if it woke the dead.

"Stay in the car," I told Solstice.

She leaned her head over, "I should come with you."

I leaned down and looked at her with a surprised glare. "Why the hell would I want you to do that," I asked.

She looked at me like I was a Neanderthal. "I know all the rooms and hiding spots in that house," she explained, "If you really want to stake all of them, I would suggest that I go." This is the part where the idiot came into play.

You know that part in the movie where the main lead takes another person with them for backup but he or she turns out being a burden? That's the same scene playing out in real time.

"If I let you go with me, you need to do what I say," I replied, "If I tell you to run, you run. Got it?" She nodded her head. *Why did I give a shit?*

The air around us seemed thick. It was hard to breathe. Solstice threw her legs out of the car and stood up. The clothes I gave her to wear from my daughter's old wardrobe didn't fit anymore. The arms of the blue long-sleeve shirt came to the middle of her forearms now, and the black skirt came up a little higher on her than I was comfortable with. She turned around to look at me and I couldn't help but notice that her breasts were starting to fill out. *Holy shit? Were they always there and I just didn't notice? Her hair went from nice and silky back to a potential afro. Maybe she only looks healthy when she has fed in some sense.*

I was taken aback at first but came back to reality when she said, "Okay, let's get this over with." I was obliged.

Before we walked into the house, I noticed an elderly man working in his yard. He was the only person in the neighborhood that didn't watch us get out of the car. He was pruning the roses that gave the only splash of color to this neighborhood. He turned around and waved his hand to Solstice and I. He turned his body around all the way to face us. I watched him as I prepared lies to tell the old man.

“You here to look at the house?” he asked. I looked over to my right and noticed the realtor sign on it. The sign looked like it went through hell and back a couple of times. It was intended to have red and blue print on it, but over the months it had turned into a pink and white. *Were these chicks squatting?*

“Yeah,” I answered, “I thought maybe I could give this place a good fixing up if I can afford it.”

“Ah,” the old man replied, “you’re in it for a potential profit then.”

“Yeah, something like that,” I said.

“Well, I hope you can,” he continued, “House has been here a long time. It would be damn good to see someone fix it up so a good family could move in.”

I felt a surge of hope course through me when he said that. There were people in this world that still gave a shit about things. *Strangers like that make me grow a big floppy one.*

“You’re roses are very pretty,” Solstice told him. I just stood and grinned uncomfortably because I knew the question that was coming next.

“Thank you,” he replied to Solstice, “Is this your daughter?” *Tch, that’s a good one.* “Her?” I questioned, “no, I found her on the side of the road and felt sorry for her.” I could feel the stink eye coming from Solstice. *It wasn’t exactly a lie.*

“You want her?” I asked.

The elderly man laughed. “No thanks, I’ve had my kids and now have grandkids. My oldest granddaughter is actually getting married this weekend. I always hoped I could see one of them get married before I died. The good Lord gave me that at least.”

“Well,” I said, “I hope it works out for her.”

“Thanks young man,” he replied, “Hope to see you again.” *Myself as well.* I watched as he turned around to prune some more. The sun hit his thick rimmed bifocals and blinded me for a moment. In that moment, if I hadn’t known any better, I would have thought I saw a woman in a white dress watching him off to his left. She had wings. Beautiful feathered wings. She was one of the greatest marvels I had witnessed in a long time. It only lasted for a second though, and then it was back to business again.

We walked up to the front door and stood in place for a minute. The lawn furniture had so much dust on it from lack of use. When

you walk the streets at night, any normal occurrence like sitting in a lawn chair goes out the door. The wasp nests were plenty. I counted seven nests in the awning above our heads. The hornets were getting ready to call it a day as well. It occurred to me that I lead a strange life to most living things. People wake up, go to work, and come home to eat. After that they go to bed at night. That doesn't necessarily apply to just people. Apparently, animals and insects do this as well. *Does that make me lower than an insect?*

I had to keep myself calm and collected. I shook my hands to keep them loose. In times like this, my hands tend to get stiff. I looked at the door, debating or not whether I should knock. The front door wasn't a redeeming factor for the house, upkeep wise. The door hinges were cracked from normal wear and tear. The paint on the door and around the trim was flaking just as much as the house itself, if not more so. The half circle windows towards the top of it were painted over. If someone was tall enough, you couldn't even see outside. *Why was it painted over?* If I were a betting man, I would conclude that it kept any light from coming inside the house. That was my first clue that an unwanted situation may occur. *I may have been too late.*

I looked down at Solstice and couldn't help myself from thinking. *If I hadn't wasted time on you, then I may not have been too late.*" I wasn't mad, just concerned. If I went in now, I may put both of us in danger. She already looks like hell.

Solstice was still holding her sides in pain. She tried her best to hide it, but I could still see it in her eyes.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

She stayed silent for a moment until she spoke. I wasn't sure if it was from pushing back the pain or trying to muster up the words that made her silent. "I suppose," she replied. She wasn't.

"Do you understand why I have to do this?" I asked.

She then nodded her head, hesitantly. "Why do you care what I think?" she retorted. I'll give credit where credit is due, but she had a point. *Why do I care? Why do I, honest to God, give a shit?* I had no qualms before about destroying these monsters because I had no one to judge me. Now, I have a set of eyes watching me.

"Do you want to stay in the car?"

She just looked up at me, a little taller than when we first met, “I get it. You’re protecting others by doing this. You don’t have to worry about me. I don’t want anyone to die from the nightwalkers or a disease that may never be cured. I am what I am, and I can’t help that. I’m not like them though.”

No, you’re not. Right now you are tame, but you could be something worse later on. I knew this and I think deep down she knew this as well.

“I’ll stay here with you,” she answered.

I nodded my head and reached for the doorknob. The brass that was painted on the knob had been worn off, but the upkeep on it was quite remarkable given the condition of the house itself. It was on very tight and was almost hard to turn, but it was unlocked. The door made a loud cringing sound, like nails on a chalkboard. If anyone was here, they knew we were as well.

Solstice took the lead and walked in. I followed, hesitantly. Looking in from the other side of the front door, the house was pretty much what I expected. A stairwell going to the second floor was in front of me a little to the left. To the right was what I presumed to be the living area, and to the right of that was what was supposed to be a dining room.

The living room had an old, black, leather sofa and beanbag chairs all around it. A rug lay in the middle of the room. It looked like it was supposed to cover the water damage on the hardwood floors. You could see the stain marks from water leaks upstairs. The damage to the hardwood floors was heartbreaking. I’ve always been a fan of hardwood floors in houses. There’s nothing like waking up in the middle of winter and having to put your slippers or socks on because the floor is so cold. *It’s funny the things you remember. I went for the feel instead of the obvious reason, the way it looked.*

The water damage to the floor was appalling. There were white stain and the boards were no longer even because the wood had swelled whenever it rained.

Christmas lights were strung around the room. Colored ones. *Tis’ the season,* I thought to myself. However, I had a feeling that this was a year round decoration. There was no decorated tree in the house. The lights weren’t even put up in an orderly fashion.

They seemed to have been thrown up against the wall and stapled. What a way to make a tacky statement.

I noticed the television was playing. In a normal creepy situation, there would usually be static on the tube. At least that's how it was in the movies. But here, there was a good little porn movie going on. Solstice started walking in the room behind me.

"Go into the other room!" I instinctually yelled when I realized that she was near. Then I remembered that she wasn't my child to be concerned about. *It's probably nothing she hadn't seen before.* I quickly had to come up with something to tell her. "Um," I said, "to look for anybody or anything." She smiled at me and walked into the dining room. *Don't smile at me like that. Kids aren't supposed to see things like that yet.*

I turned off the television while a brown haired woman was in mid orgasm. Now the house was silent. I looked down the hallway and saw Solstice going into a room connected to the dining room; the kitchen perhaps. I walked after her and passed the front door. I had a thought. It was still daylight out and it may be in our best interest to keep it open for a while in case we need to leave in a hurry. I cracked the door open while enduring the cringing sound it made. A beam of light crept in as if it were drawing a line down the middle of the house. *Not much daylight left, we need to get this over with.* I put my hands on Solstice's shoulder. "Where is everyone?"

She pointed toward the ceiling. "Upstairs in their bedrooms."

"Why would they be sleeping?"

"They sleep during the day to get ready for business at night," she replied.

I couldn't argue with her. *Is it because they're hookers or vampires?*

"How many?" I asked.

"It's hard to say," she answered, "I'm not sure how many are actually sleeping."

"Not that," I said gruffly, "How many people?"

"Oh, um, maybe seven or eight," she told me. *Pay dirt!*

"So four bedrooms to cover? Okay." I told myself out loud. I started to creep up the stairs and the noise they made was just as loud as the damn door. I stopped dead in my tracks and looked at Solstice. "Wow," I said, in shock over the noise of the steps.

“Seriously?!” I wasn’t sure what to expect from her. It’s not like she could give me an answer on why the steps were squeaky.

“What do you want from me?” she quietly shouted, “The house is old!”

I put my hand on the banister and felt more of the colored lights wrapped around it. They continued to the very top, as if the upstairs had a treat for me. *Well, I guess it did for people who paid for it. Welcome to the magic land of fucking. Where you can do anything you want for a price.*

I took my time getting to the top of the stairs. The entire time, I was thinking of how the realtors would describe this house if you saw it on a house presentation on public access television.

This spacious two story Victorian style home is a perfect match for those interested in a fixer-upper opportunity. This four bedroom two-bath house has water damaged hardwood floors that bend when you step on them, water spots on the ceilings on both floors, and the roof may need a little work. There is no air conditioning, and a pungent smell of three-day-old unwashed whore vagina. The smell really brings the house together.

The smell was terrible. It was literally the smell of sweat and sex. The odor of numerous women and the men they took to their beds was breathtaking, and not in the good way. It only got worse as you got closer to the second floor.

“How did you do it?” I asked as I walked slowly up the stairs. “How did you manage to let yourself stay here?”

“I had nowhere else to go and they gave me Oreos.” she answered.

The only thought that I had going through my head was, “*Do you even know where those Oreos have been?*” Like I was giving the sex talk to someone to stay abstinent. *You don’t even know where they have been before you!* I hated that talk. I always thought people needed to realize that they needed to live in the real world. Though, what I knew of the real world was nothing like most people knew it. *I’m not sure if that’s an advantage or a disadvantage.*

We had reached the top floor. I started down the hallway looking at all the doors. There were three on the left and two on the right. One was probably a bathroom. When I got between the first

two rooms I stopped in my tracks and put my hand on Solstice to keep her from walking. “Don’t move,” I whispered.

The smell of the upstairs was no longer an issue, but the stale air stayed looming around us. “We’re too late,” Solstice said.

At the end of the hallway, a woman stood with her back turned to us. She seemed like she was staring at herself in the mirror that was hanging on the wall. The mirror was very old and dusty. Like an antique that was just discovered. She wore a blue dress that had been tattered. They had, indeed, gotten to this house. And now there were at least seven more people that were vampires and carrying the AIDS virus. The question was, if they had fully turned. I wasn’t interested on how many people they may have fucked during the transformation. The only thing that came through my mind was where my damn high beam halogen light was.

“Solstice,” I whispered, “I need for you to go into the trunk of the car and get the thing that looks like a giant flash light. Can you do that?” I turned to see her response and she was holding her side again. While I was waiting for the answer, I looked at the rooms on both my sides. I could see a blonde haired woman on my left, sleeping. To my right was another woman, this one with black hair. She was sleeping as well, but they were both breathing very heavy and it just seemed to get worse after each second. In fact, the woman in front of us, down the hallway, was breathing heavy and fast. I started to think that the woman in the blue dress wasn’t looking at herself in the mirror; rather, she went to sleep that way.

I had no idea who or what was in the other room. I shimmied to the left to look inside and saw that there was a man. He had a blood trail coming from his neck, and the flowing blood was going in between the floor cracks. A college football team’s hat was hanging off his head. The green and yellow flannel shirt had been shredded. His jeans had a wet spot in the crotch, undoubtedly from when he urinated on himself.

“We need to go,” Solstice said.

“We will,” I replied, “but if you get what I asked for then I can take them all out right now.”

Solstice had a look of staggering desperation in her eyes. If I didn’t know better, I would of thought she was about to cry. “No, we need to go now,” she wailed, while holding back her fear.

“Why?” I asked.

“Just trust me,” she said, “PLEASE!” She started yanking on my arm.

“Stop,” I said.

“No,” she replied.

“What is the matter?” I asked again, just in a different way.

“Please,” she whimpered, “please don’t hate me!”

I just shook my head, trying to get a grasp of the situation. I had a house full of possible vampires, a house that reeked of seminal fluids and a whiny kid tugging at my arm. *That’s why I work alone.*

“Why would I hate you?” I asked politely.

“Because I’m bleeding,” she answered like her voice was going out.

“Where?” I asked, while searching on her body for cuts and scrapes. I searched Solstice from head to toe. I couldn’t find a single wound anywhere on her.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked, “I don’t see anything!”

“I’m not hurt or cut,” she whispered. That’s when everything came into place. She wasn’t hurt, she didn’t get cut, and she was having cramps in the car on the way here. Even if she did, it would just heal back up. The holding of her sides and the faces of pain, it all started making sense.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

I held her shoulders and rubbed them to either comfort her or myself. “Are you telling me that you’re menstruating right now?” I asked.

“I don’t know what that means,” she replied.

“Are you having you’re period?” I reiterated.

“Yes,” she answered.

I just smiled at her. Dana never got to that point in her life before she passed. To be honest, I never thought I would be good at explaining that sort of thing to a girl, but it seemed like I had an opportunity after this was done.

“It is okay,” I muttered, “it’s just a natural part of life.”

“You don’t understand,” she said, “we need to leave!” The white paint from the hallway and bedrooms was giving a shine to her skin. For a moment I thought that it was beautiful, and then

reality set back in. Blood in a houseful of vampires is not good, even a little.

I stood up, facing Solstice and the stairs behind her. I looked over my right shoulder to the end of the hallway. The woman in the blue dress had turned around and was staring at us. I twisted the rest of my body around to face her. I could feel Solstice grabbing at me to stand up. I had two rooms to my left and my right. In my peripheral view, I could see the ladies in their bed. They raised the upper part of their bodies. I had never been so scared in my life. They didn't even bend their knees to sit up. They sat up in their beds and looked forward towards the walls of their respective rooms. The room to my left with the blonde woman seemed to grow darker, as did the other. A set of long, blood laden fingers reached around the side of the door. There was still flesh embedded in the fingernails. I could hear the bed creaking as the body of the hand that grasped the left side of the door moved. My skin started to crawl. I soon saw the black, dangling, oily hair come into view. Her face started to appear from the side. I tried to keep an eye on all of the bodies that I saw on the floor. The woman's full face came into frame. Her eyes were big, not blinking. Then I could see her mouth, and it was smiling. It was smiling the whole time. From the time she awoke until the time she revealed herself. She liked something.

The blanket that belonged to the woman with the blonde hair fell down around to her waist, revealing her implanted breasts. The woman on the right side of me had a shirt and panties on. The woman in the blue dress stepped forward. Her bones popped when she moved. They were all smiling at me as they crept slowly out of their resting areas towards us.

I grabbed Solstice, who was now clinging to me. "On the count of three you need to run and not look back," I told her. I took her slight head movement as an indication that she understood.

"One," I started counting. The woman nearest the door on the left had her fangs out and her other hand came to grab the edge of the door. I could hear a hissing sound coming from her.

The woman in blue started moaning. Not a dreadful moaning. More like an orgasmic moan. It was terrifying to me. She walked closer to me and I could see her fangs too. They still had blood on them from her apparent last victim.

“Two,” I continued. The dark haired woman came around the edge of the door and started to climb the wall next to me. Like a spider, she moved across the wall staring at me. The women in the beds simultaneously jerked their heads towards me and started to wail like banshees. I’ve never seen this before; this type of behavior coming from vampires. Even recently turned vampires don’t act this predatory. I covered my ears because I thought I would go deaf.

“THREE!” I yelled.

Solstice immediately dashed down the stairs. The woman in blue started to dash towards me and the women who were in their beds came out. They weren’t looking at me, they were watching Solstice. I took a cue from Solstice and started toward the stairs.

Looking back on the situation, it seemed like the entire ordeal was being played in slow motion. When I reached the top of the staircase, the vampire that was scaling the wall jumped on my back, wailing. I lost my control while trying to get her off of me. I twisted my ankle and went tumbling down the stairwell. The vampire that was clung to me was still attached even as I fell.

I went reaching for the holiday lights to stop from falling anymore. I couldn’t get a good grasp. I was halfway down the stairs by the time I finally did get a grasp of something. When I came to a halt from tumbling, the vampire, whom was nude now that I got a good look at her, was hanging onto my leg and was climbing up it. She looked middle aged. Aged to the point where she had no business being naked at all, even when she was alive.

I looked above me and saw the other three vampires fighting each other to get down the stairs. I looked back down at the vampire clinging to me. I took my right foot and started kicking her in the head to get her off of me. “Get the fuck off of me!” I shouted. She still had that evil grin on her face. I was going to kick that smile right off her damn face. After the third kick, she fell down the rest of the stairs and slid into the light that was coming from the cracked door.

I could hear her screaming as her head landed in the beam of the light. Steam rose from her head from the top to above her mouth. She was flailing around, convulsing. I had no time to watch. I stood back up and thought; for a second, that I would make it out of the whorehouse alive. I went to run down the stairs and to my

surprise fell down again. To my behest, I had sprained my ankle and it hurt like hell when I stepped down. I went down like a wet blanket. I tumbled down, watching my world spin with me. The last thing I remember was landing next to the naked vampire whose head looked like someone stepped on it. I couldn't get up. I think I blacked out. I could hear the wailing of the feral vampires in the short distance. I couldn't help but dream, even for the short time that I was unconscious.

It was cold in my bedroom, our bedroom. The windows were open, allowing the winter breeze to come inside. I was laying in my king sized bed with the nice thread count sheets wrapped around me. The room had a blue hue to it from the moonlight that was beaming in. This was our favorite time of year. It was worth being cold for those few seconds before either one of us came into bed, just so our body heat could warm us. This didn't seem right.

I sat up and looked ahead, realizing that I had no clothes on. Megan was at the foot of the bed watching me. She had her old, blue, 'Ghostbusters' t-shirt on that was a size too small for her with a pair of panties. I loved that shirt on her. It clung tightly to her chest, making her breasts take shape of her natural gift. "Hey you," Megan said to me. I wasn't sure what to say.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, realizing that may not be the best thing to say. She started climbing on the bed. She looked amazing. Her hair was curled and she still had her make-up on. I never thought she needed the make-up to be beautiful, but it was nice when she did.

"You died," I said, "I saw you...I was there!" I exclaimed.

She continued coming towards me. "My body gave away, not my soul," she retorted.

I couldn't say anything as she made her way to me. "You've been with me the entire time?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Then you know what I have become."

"I do, but I don't care about any of that"

She started to kiss me. I knew something was wrong with this, but I didn't care. Whatever made her come back to me. I slid my

hands down the bottom of her shirt and began to raise it up her body. She raised her arms and allowed me to take it off. Her nipples were hard and her breasts were smooth, just like the rest of her body. She raised herself up off her knees and slid down her baby blue panties. Her thighs quickly draped over mine. She slid the sheet off of me to expose my raging erection. She reached down while she smiled and grabbed it. She brought her pelvis over mine and guided me inside of her. She was wet, and she had come back to me. She started to ride me as I grasped her body next to mine.

She moaned. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you to," I replied to her. She was like silk. She went up and down on me, each time moaning louder and louder. *Wake up.* I didn't want to. She told me she loved me and I retorted the same. I grabbed her ass as her breasts were pressed up against my chest. She tilted her head back. *It's not real.* The whispers bothered me. "Shut up," I said out loud to the voice. Megan didn't pay attention. She continued to rock my proverbial world.

"You've been a bad boy," she said with her face to the white ceiling that once was our bedroom. Everything was the same inside, from the decorations to the tiny crack in the mirror of the dresser. Did I die? Was this heaven? *Get up, we have to go!*

"You're a bad, bad man," Megan continued. She never liked the dirty talk before. Why now?

"You're awful," she persisted, "killing us like you do." I heard a sound. It was a 'snick' sound.

"Oh God, no," I whispered. Megan's head came down and a string of drool landed on my neck.

"This isn't real, they're just trying to keep you asleep," Solstice's voice said. Megan opened her mouth while growling at me. Fangs had grown and protruded from her mouth. She stopped for a moment and looked at me. I knew what was going to happen next. I started to tear up and hugged the creature that was my wife.

"No, this isn't real!" I bellowed, "No...don't do this to me, not again! I'll do anything! Please!" The growl continued next to my head while hers didn't move. I felt the tears running off my face.

"Goddamn you...damn it...I hate you all...I hate you...GODDAMN YOU!"

“You need to get up,” Solstice was telling me while I was struggling to open my eyes, “the sun is about to fully set!” My eyes came into focus. There was a beam of light coming from the cracked door that separated us from the feral creatures that were waiting to make us their lunch. The beam of light started to get narrower every second that went by. I lifted my head a little and saw the vampire in the blue dress laughing at me.

It was her! She's the one who put that dream into my head. Fucking bitch! Damn whore! I will kill you, I swear it!

“We don't have the time for that,” Solstice told me, “we have to go.”

This wasn't over yet. I didn't want to get up. I just wanted to go back to sleep.

“They'll pay for that,” She told me.

She knew. She knew what was going on and she tried to save me from it...I think she did in some way.

“COME ON!” Solstice yelled, “GET YOUR ASS UP!” The light was almost gone and as soon as it was they would destroy us. I had nothing to protect us with. I strained getting up because of my ankle. I watched as the four creatures were getting ready to pounce on us. There was one clinging to the ceiling, watching us like an owl hunting a mouse to feast on. The bitch in the blue dress just stood, waiting. The other two were pushing each other around, fighting on who would get first bite.

I hobbled out of the house, watching them as I left. The sun was almost down. I hobbled down the walkway with Solstice's help, but it still hurt like hell.

“Are you going to make it?” she asked me.

“I think so,” I answered with pain in my voice, “Just get me to the car!”

We got to the curb where that piece of shit Geo was parked. Solstice got into the passenger side quickly. I leaned against the car using it as a prop to get around to the other side. When I got to my side of the car I noticed two things.

One, the vampires were in plain view looking out the door and wailing louder than before. Second, the old man raking the leaves from his yard was still outside. He had a green knitted sweater on

with yellow golf pants. The beautiful garden stood out amongst the dark and dreary houses in the neighborhood. In retrospect, it probably would have been better if I told him to get inside earlier, but instead I admired him and his garden. I'm stupid.

"Is everything all right?" he asked, politely. I looked at the creatures to my right and glanced back to my left at the old man.

"Drop what you're doing and get inside your house," I yelled. I startled him, I think. He dropped his rake and went to bend for his cane. I didn't have time to make sure he was going back to the house. "GET IN THE CAR!" Solstice yelled. I took a cue and got the car keys out and unlocked the door. *She could have opened the door.* I sat down and put the key into the ignition and turned it. The wails of the creatures got louder, and to make matters worse...the car wouldn't start all the way up.

"FUCK!" I yelled. I continued to turn the key. The engine wanted to start but wouldn't. As I was trying to crank the car I looked to my right out the passenger seat window. I watched the old man as he slowly made his way to his front door. He turned his head to look at us. He gave us a smile and continued to do so for a few seconds. The wailing got louder and his smile went into a frown. His eyes went from happy to a look of desperation. The naked vampire wailed and attacked him from behind and knocked him down. His cane went flying forward and he cried for help. I couldn't help him, but I wanted to. *I'm pathetic.* The monster ripped his clothes apart and soon his flesh. It was like a train wreck. I didn't want to look but I forced myself to, like I was punishing myself.

The two minion vampires started to beat on the car windows. Any second they would shatter the glass. I gave the key one good turn and the car started. I pushed on the accelerator and flew down the street with tears streaming down my face. I was responsible for that poor man's death and there was nothing I could do to stop it. "We're not alone," Solstice said.

"What?" I exclaimed.

A pounding was coming from the top of the car. *One of those damn things attached itself to the roof.* It was punching its way through. I could see the dent getting bigger and deeper. *BOOM...BOOM...BOOM.* It just got louder and louder. The metal came apart and an arm came through. It started to reach around and

eventually got to Solstice's hair and started pulling it. She started screaming for me to get it off her. I didn't do that. Instead, I pressed on the gas and got the car up to eighty miles an hour down a residential neighborhood. I would have made it faster but that was as fast as the piece of shit car would go. When I got up to speed I slammed on the brake. I could see the hair being torn from Solstice's head as the vampire went flying forward. I heard a tear come from above us. The blonde vampire had gotten her arm caught, and when I pushed on the brakes her arm came off her body and was now dangling like a rearview mirror decoration.

The vampire bounced three times, leaving a blood splatter each time. It lay on the pavement, but I knew it wasn't dead. If I had the time I would have went out and destroyed it myself, but I didn't. When I looked in the rearview mirror I saw vampires running towards the car, and it wasn't just the other three. There were more.

Five, eight, ten, wait, about twenty...shit! I put the car into drive and sped off as fast as I could. *Was that cry they let out a call for others? Was it me they really wanted?* I looked over to Solstice to ask what the hell was really going on but she spoke first.

"Gavin...I don't feel good," she cried. Her hair started coming out naturally. Her face was whiter than usual and her lips were turning blue. My paternal instincts came into focus. I was trying to block out the cries of the vampires that were pursuing us. I just need to get a little distance from them and it would get safer. I had forgotten about the severed arm from the vampire hanging from the roof of the car. I took some blankets I had found in the car and started to pull down the arm. I heard flesh ripping from it and it was as equally disgusting as it sounds. I was not in the habit of retrieving severed body parts. *Do I throw it out the window?*

"What do I do now?" I asked. I wasn't expecting an answer from anyone. I needed someone I could trust. I needed a doctor. I needed an ally and a friend. I needed my brother-in-law. I needed Allen Greene and a clean pair of underwear because I think I pissed myself.

CHAPTER 11

It was a long drive to St. Mary's Hospital. The entire drive was like pouring salt into an open wound. I haven't felt that hopeless since my family died. I watched as Solstice remained unconscious during the ride. *Was she losing so much blood? Maybe she did need blood after all. Maybe she was a reluctant half-breed vampire, sucking on dead animals or something.* The hospital wasn't that far. If you got on Business 85 you could take an exit that leads right to it. *I'm dodging the truth.*

I was scared, but not sure about what. It could have been the dying twelve year old in the passenger seat of the Geo, or that I couldn't take care of the job that I intended to do. Either way, I had to face the facts. We were going to be hunted. I didn't know it for a fact, but Solstice told me that she was sought after for her 'unique' ability. Should I have cut her loose earlier? *I probably should have.* But could I have been able to live with myself if I did? *Probably not.*

The fact was that we were stuck together until something major happened. I had no doubt that it was her scent that made those 'things' act like they did. Feral. Vampires, in general, don't let themselves be known. The whores in the house had no problem letting themselves be heard or seen. I think that was the nightmare that haunted me while driving the car.

The scene was on repeat and I didn't have the control box to stop it. It was like a robbery victim after being held up at gunpoint. Whatever the reason was, probably all of them, I was scared.

The next thing to do was to pray that Allen was working. My brother in law was the only person; aside from Megan, that I got along with. Sometimes people think that getting a college education and settling down with a career actually mellows you out. This was not the case with Allen.

Allen was a perverted teenager stuck in the body of a thirty-something body. We had an annoying habit when Megan was alive. We acted homosexuals. Megan hated it. She told me that we did it all too well. We didn't care though. It was funny as hell.

It's been about a year since I've seen him. He's tried getting in contact with me since Dana's and Megan's death, but just like with everything else, I cut all ties with him. *For what*, I thought, *a shit job of killing doomed to-be-turned vampires?* That was the reason, as dumb as it sounds.

I didn't know what I was going to say to him after all these years. *Hey, how's it been? So...uh...I hunt vampires now. Not regular ones. The ones that were once hookers. Why? Oh, well, just to make your job easier and all the other doctors in the Upstate area.* This is going to be interesting.

I pulled into the emergency room parking area. It was slow this evening. *This is nothing like the television shows.* Time was running out. I took a minute to survey the area. I couldn't have anyone see me with her. I needed to keep this as quiet as possible. There were people walking around and orderlies taking their smoke break. I had to decide if I was going to go in alone to see if Allen was there, or carry her in. If I carried her in I would draw more attention to us. My nerves were making my leg bounce. I was getting anxious. *Shit...the hell with it.*

I darted out of the car. At a steady pace, I walked up to automatic doors. I passed the orderlies taking their smoke break. Unfortunately, they were watching me. I hoped they didn't see Solstice in the car. I didn't think they did. They were probably thinking, 'What a piece of shit car.' I know I would.

When the doors opened, I felt a warm gust of wind on my face. It was relief to me because I was freezing. I looked at the reception area and saw the nurses going about their business. They were typing on the computer, ordering tests, and whatever else a nurse does. To my right was a long hallway with, what I assumed, were patient rooms. I started to walk down the corridor to take a peek in

each one. Nobody paid me a bit of attention, which is what I wanted. But if I were a patient or a visitor, I would be a little pissed. Nobody said anything until a dark haired nurse came out of the fourth room to the right just as I was passing it.

“Did you need help finding someone?” she asked. Megan was the name on her tag. Megan. *Megan?*

“Did you need help finding something?” she said. My wife was in front of me with a clipboard.

“No,” I answered in disbelief. This isn’t real. That vampire in the house did this to me. Is this an after affect or is she still in there?

“Are you sure?” she asked again, “I could help you play doctor and I could be the naughty nurse.” She laughed manically. Get out. PLEEEASE!

“Sir?” she asked again. I came out of the fog that was plaguing me. I looked down at her nametag again, and it read ‘Karen’. I had to compose myself quickly and look up at her or she might have thought I was staring at her tit. “Yes, uh, actually,” I finally replied, “I need to see Dr. Greene.” *HA! That was a character off a TV show.*

“Sure,” she said, “he’s in Radiology.” That was a relief. Something was finally going right. “Are you a patient?” she asked. I was sort of offended at that, but then again, I could see why she would think that.

“No, I’m his brother-in-law,” I answered. Karen looked at me with a look of disbelief. *What if she knows that Megan was his sister? Wait, that’s dumb. Is it?*

“Sure,” she continued, “I’ll take you back there.” She started walking in front of me. I knew that I should have been in more of a rush, but I couldn’t help watching her strut down the hall. *It’s like she smuggling two hams’ back there.*

We ended up at a room with x-rays hung up on top of lights. I took a quick peek inside while the nurse was telling Allen that he had a visitor.

“Okay,” he said, “They can come in.” I made my way into the frame of the door and nodded to Karen with thanks.

“Holy shit,” he said, “GAVIN!!!” He hopped right out of his chair and came at me with force. You would have thought I was giving him money.

"I've missed you man," he said, while he hugged me.

I couldn't hug him back for some reason. *What the hell is wrong with me? I disappear for a year and I can't even hug him. What the hell is wrong with me? I have a lot on my mind. Yeah. That's it.*

"You should have called....Jesus, you look like shit," he told me.

"Well, you are so not getting any later," I replied. *That's what the old me would have said.*

Allen laughed at me. "You see that nurse that brought you in? Violated that like a farm animal the other night. High five!" *Yep, he certainly hasn't changed, and I take comfort in that.* Allen had his hand in the air waiting for a caveman like exchange of clapping hands together.

"Allen," I said, "I need your help, man. I need your help and I need you to keep it on the down low."

Allen put his arm down slowly and a look of concern spread across his face. "Yeah, um, what's up?" he asked.

"I have a girl in the car right now," I said.

"I dig it," he replied, "get her too drunk?"

"No," I said, "it's not like that. She's about twelve and she's homeless. I found her barely awake, so I brought her here."

"Why do we have to keep it all hush-hush?" he asked. I had to come up with a white lie and fast.

"I think someone was using her for, you know, sexual favors," I lied, "I don't want anyone looking for her."

Allen, for the first time in a long time, got serious. There were many things that Allen is light hearted about, but child abuse is not one of them.

"All right," he said, "there's an emergency exit around the side of the building. Wait there for me."

I nodded my head and paced towards the door, and then it occurred to me. "What about the alarm?" I asked.

He just waved his hand. "I have keys, don't worry about it."

Good.

I proceeded out of the x-ray viewing room to hang a left and go back out the way I came. I quickly walked out and saw the same two orderlies were still smoking. They watched me as I went out

the door. I dashed across the parking lot to the Geo. I decided to drive around to the emergency exit and park.

When I got into the car, I watched the orderlies talking to one another. I noticed something that intrigued me. As they were talking to each other, they were playing with their retractable key chains. They were pulling them out as far as they could then let go of them. I wasn't interested in the fact they were playing with them, but rather that the devices used a metal chain chord opposed to the regular string that's usually used. *Those are nice, and silver.*

After a quick idea rushed to my head, I started up the car with no problem. *Go figure.* I gently pushed on the gas and pulled out of the parking space. I took a right around the building where the emergency exit was. It was lit up as plain as day. I parked on the curb and jumped out of the car to retrieve Solstice.

I held her as we were waiting on the steps by the exit. I rocked her back and forth singing any lullaby tunes that I knew. Sometimes I had to make up my own lyrics to replace the ones I didn't know right off hand. *I was never good at that part of being a father.*

Solstice rested her head on my chest. I wasn't even sure if she was conscious. If she was a vampire, then she didn't need to breathe anyway. *Could she really die?* I petted her matted hair. Despite all that has happened in the past few hours, her hair smelled like tangerines. *Was that a natural smell?* I caught myself talking to her.

"I don't know if you can really hear me. You'll get better soon. You have to. I have nothing else to hold on to. I want to hold on to this, whatever it is. You've had a bad time. My daughter once asked me to stop all the bad things that happen to people like I was Superman. She begged me to make it all not true."

"Truth of the matter is that I would have. It's not fair. It's not fair for a child to be born then be asked to endure all the cruelties of the world. I wish I could take it all away, but I couldn't...I can't. I'm doing the best I can though. That's who I am now. That's who we are, and I'm sorry for that." I whispered to her. I could feel the saline building up in my eyes. *Why?* I think that what I have been doing was going to come to this eventually.

I didn't want to believe that, but it was happening. They were looking for her now and there was nothing to stop them. I've been

a poser for so long that I got caught up in myself and this persona of being a bad ass, because that was the only thing that kept me going. Now, there was something else to keep me going. That's why I wanted to cry. *What a pussy.*

I heard the chirp of the exit alarm go off. I looked around and Allen was waiting for us. I stood up with Solstice over my left shoulder.

"We're going to put her in a room that doesn't get used that much," Allen said. I started to walk through the threshold.

"That way we can have some privacy," he added as I walked. I nodded my head as he allowed me pass. I stopped after I entered the building. I looked around the area and noticed that it was very dark in comparison to the rest of the floor. This was the area that janitors fear to tread. The light fixtures were off balance and they were out. The walls looked like they hadn't been painted since it was built. It was a shitty part of the hospital, but that's the sort of life I lived, *no more extravagant things.*

Allen took the lead and led me to the second room on the right. It was set up with all the devices and utensils used in a normal hospital setting. I gently placed Solstice on the bed and took off her shoes. *I hate shoes on a bed.*

"Okay," Allen said, "we need to take off her clothes."

"Come again?" I regretted saying that as soon as it was out of my mouth because I knew what was going to be muttered next.

"That's what she said," he said to himself. *Yup, that's what I thought was going to happen.*

"Seriously though, we need to take off her clothes," he said.

With what I thought was rightfully justified hesitation, I pulled her blue long-sleeve shirt over her head. *It's like pulling off a Band-Aid. Just do it real fast and get it over with.* I'm not sure what I was going to expect. It wasn't like she had developed breasts or pubic hair yet. I did my job and I let Allen take off her pants. She lay on the hospital bed like a corpse getting ready to go to the morgue. Allen put a sheet over her fairly quickly. I wasn't sure if I wanted to see her naked body any longer than I needed to.

"Okay," Allen said, "I'm going to start by starting her on a saline drip IV."

I really don't need the commentary.

“A little oxygen mask action should help as well,” he continued. He took a needle out from the drawer to the left of the bed. He proceeded to go for her arm. I stopped him for some reason. I thought that if he ran tests and got the results, then there would be a huge explanation ahead for me tonight.

“It’s okay, I need to draw some blood for testing,” Allen explained. I shook my head in disagreement. “Gavin,” he said baffled, “this isn’t my first rodeo. We need this to figure out what’s wrong with her.” I took my hand off his arm and let him stick Solstice with a needle.

“There, that wasn’t that horrible, was it?” he asked, with a tone of sarcasm.

I sat down in the chair that was next to the window. I laid my head back to gather my thoughts. *This wasn’t going to end well.*

“I’m going to test this blood myself,” Allen said, walking out of the room.

I didn’t say anything. *God, I was tired.* I lay back in the chair listening to the heart monitor. It was going at a steady pace. I was relieved in a way. Solstice actually had a heart that beat.

I couldn’t rest though. I was on edge waiting for the next surprise, and I knew there would be one. I stood up and looked at Solstice for a minute before I went to take a walk. They say if you gaze at something long enough, you’ll see it move. I found that to be true once while staring at inanimate objects in my apartment. *My apartment. I’m not sure when I’ll be able to go back home...home. What does that word mean to me these days?*

I stared at Solstice, the difference now was that she was indeed moving. Not her, but the sheet that covered her. It was like the sheet had a pulse. I cocked my head to the side with my mouth hanging open. I looked out the door, debating if I should get Allen. I wouldn’t have been able to find him anyway.

I put my hand out in front of me, ready to pull the sheet off. I was nervous about this course of action. I didn’t want her to be uncovered and naked, and I didn’t want any more surprises. *This is the part where the audience yells at the screen, ‘Don’t do it!’ You know it’s probably going to happen, but there’s that chance that someone may interrupt.* There wasn’t going to be any disruption now. No one knew we were there.

I clenched the sheet with an unyielding grasp. I pulled it off to see what was underneath it. I didn't see anything foreign walking around her. I thought it may have been some sort of animal. *If it were, I was going to report it to the Department of Health.* It was just Solstice's childlike body. I exhaled and went to reach for the sheet to put it back on her, and then something caught my eye. A bubble. Her skin was bubbling.

I kept one hand on the sheet while I watched something the Discovery Channel couldn't catch. Her skin was transforming. No, that's not the right terminology. It was stretching. I could see the tiny little tears like someone was ripping clothing.

First, her hair started growing back and became lighter in shade. The red I saw in her hair earlier that night was more noticeable. It was beautiful. I continued to scan her body up and down with my eyes. *This had to be painful.* Her skin was regaining some color and it had a rose colored hue to it now. Her fingernails were growing and taking a form that most fingernails take by themselves. They looked manicured. Her body was giving her naturally beautiful traits. Even knowing this, what happened next still came as a shock.

She started to arch her back. Her skin was making a ripple throughout her body. The bubbles were starting to grow and pulsate. Her tiny child nipples were expanding, and with that, her chest started to grow. I could see flakes of skin falling on the bed and on the floor. Her breasts were forming. Her skin started unfolding into something... beautiful. I looked her up and down during this metamorphosis. Pubic hair started growing. I put my hand around my mouth in disbelief at what I was witnessing. I always knew, as a father, that I may one day have to accept that this was going to happen to my child. The difference was that would have been gradual, not an unnatural occurrence.

I wasn't sure what I needed to do. This seemed wrong. I didn't know the rules. When they're little it's not a big deal, but she wasn't 'bigger' until thirty seconds ago. *What the fuck do I do?* I just took the sheet that was still in my hand and quickly threw it over her. *I think I'm going to vomit.* I backed up and watched the blanket move with her changing body. I dashed out of the room. I didn't know what the hell I was going to do. How was I going to explain to Allen why she suddenly grew a pair of tits? I needed to

get away for a bit, but I had nowhere to go. I went down the hallway towards the reception area.

On the way, I came upon the janitor's station to my left. I stopped and looked around to see if anyone was around to see me. I knew what I wanted. I knew what I needed. It was just the task of finding it. I walked into the janitor's supply room. There were two rows of metal shelves parallel to each other. I went down the first row and saw nothing but glass cleaner lining the shelves. I looked down and saw a biohazard bin to my left on the floor.

This was hospital garbage, and God help me, I went through it. I split the bag open and carefully pulled out used needles. I just needed four or five. I dug through all the filth to find them. All the piss and shit swirled around. The ass fat of liposuction patients and used breast implants squirmed around the bag. *This hospital did everything.*

I found five, fairly clean; given the circumstances, needles. I went through the second isle of cleaning products and discovered the bleach. I took each needle and jammed the needles through the plastic bottle and filled the syringes with the bleach, all five of them.

There was one more thing I needed. *Where the hell were they stashed?* I lurked around the back area. *I would give real money if I could get a break.* This may be only form of defense now. I need to be prepared. I needed the focus and drive to see this through to the end as best as possible. I needed a goddamn weapon.

I spotted a desk, and to my delight, there lay two retractable key chains with silver chords. It was like a spotlight was put on them and cherubs began playing their harps. It was angelic, like it was meant to be. I'm talking like this was the Holy Grail. Well it was. It was mine and nothing was going to take that moment away. This was the night I finally; for the first time, felt power. These would be the stupid little devices that would save my life on more than one occasion.

After my personal moment of glory I went to bathroom to wash off the syringes and, of course, my hands.

CHAPTER 12

Okay, just need to make this knot so the chain doesn't retract. Yeah, that's it! I'm done. I put the chains of the key holders in my coat pocket. One on each side, so I could get to them easily. After putting the weapons away, I looked at my long black coat. It was filthy. I looked at the lint that attached to the wool over time. I was surprised it was still black to the eyes. I looked up and down the sleeves and saw the stains. Mustard, taco sauce, blood, and...I don't want to know what that one is. I sat at the pew that was second closest to the platform in the hospital chapel looking at myself, both physically and mentally.

I was like a shadow in a dark room where the only light was the red reflecting off the candle holders. To be honest, it was a creepy setting. Some poor bystander comes in to pray for their dying loved one, and they see me. A darkly dressed man with a pale white face sitting in a chapel where he had no business. In fact, I didn't belong there. If I were raised in a home that consisted of church goers, I would have been Catholic.

I went a couple of times in my life and was bored out of my mind. When I got older, I tried to gain more faith than I already had. Instead, it felt like I was being judged by the people who attended. *Funny, I thought that was God's job.* I had faith, even though I've never been sure what that faith was. Most of my life, I was agnostic. *I think I have a prescription for that. I crack myself up.* I was already depressed and the visual of Jesus hanging on the cross just made me feel worse.

I slouched down and laid my head down, resting my chin on my chest. I was in a very tranquil state. I saw myself laying on a plain of long blades of grass swaying to the wind. I could feel the breeze passing through the strands of my hair. I opened my eyes and saw an old house with a cotton field in the back. I stood up and made my way towards the white house.

The house looked as if it were built before or during the Civil War. I made my way up the gravel road leading up to it. I could hear children playing somewhere in the distance. It sounded like they were playing ring around the rosy perhaps. The sun beamed directly on me. It was nice to feel the sun again. I haven't seen the sun since I started doing my night work.

I continued to walk down the driveway, if that's what it was called. I was sure that if I used the term with somebody from the past, they wouldn't know what the hell I was talking about.

A woman stood in front of the front door on the wraparound porch. She wore a blue dress and had dark hair. *That dress looks familiar.* I continued to walk closer to the house and the closer I got, the bigger her smile was.

"*Velvet,*" a voice said to me. I thought maybe it was my own psyche playing tricks on me. Velvet? Okay, maybe her dress was made of velvet. I couldn't be sure from this distance.

I got to the stairs of the porch. I thought my nice dream would last until I woke up. *Of course not, that would be too fucking convenient.* The woman from the whorehouse that wore the blue dress was standing in front of me with a smile that seemed too wide to be human. "What do you want with me?" I asked.

She jerked her neck and head to my right and hissed, "So presumptuous. Always thinking that everything is about you. That's how people die around you. It's quite amusing if you think about it. A man that wants to protect, always seems to be part of the reason they die."

"SHUT UP!" I shouted. The children I heard in the background started laughing.

"I know," Velvet replied, "it's hard to hear the truth. It's why the old man died, and it's why your family died. Because you only thought about yourself."

"That's not true," I said.

She jerked her head over to the left now. I could hear her bones popping when she did it. “Why do you do it?” Velvet asked, “Why do you fight a battle you will never win?”

“No one else will,” I answered.

“You’re the dumb one,” she laughed, “Everyone stays away from us, but you chase us.” Her teeth clacked together when she laughed. It was quite unnerving. “Just bring us the half-breed and we can stop this useless charade,” she continued.

“She’s not like you,” I said.

“You have quite a flare for the obvious don’t you?” she retorted. She bent her body backwards and squealed while doing so. She was like a live rag doll. “Where are you going to go?” she asked, “Anywhere you go I can find you. Whenever she bleeds we detect her immediately. STOP RUNNING!”

“I don’t have much reason for living anymore. I’m a man with nothing else to lose,” I said, “But I’ll take as many of you down as possible.”

“Where are you going to run, where are you going to hide?” Velvet asked, “You can’t go anywhere...there will be no one like you left.” She started laughing. She sounded like someone with bronchitis trying to laugh. Every second that went by, her laugh got louder. The children I heard in the back, their laughing got louder too.

“He’s so stupid.”

“What a dummy!”

I heard the children’s insults mixed in with the laughing. I needed to run away. Wait, I couldn’t. This was all in my mind, and it was Velvet’s doing. *Bitch!* I put my hands to my ears to drown out the noise.

The gravel underneath me started to move. I picked up my feet one at a time to see what it was exactly. I could see fingers in the mounds that were growing beside me. *Oh shit!* I started to run, but the fingers and the arms they were attached to started grabbing my legs. I tried punching the hands and arms as hard as I could, but it was like punching stone. They started pulling me underground. As I sunk lower into the earth, the hands started pushing my head in. I tried calling for help but the laughing from the children and Velvet just drowned it out. The dirt and stone started entering my mouth

and nose and soon I was under the earth trying to grasp any air I could...I would die soon.

I opened my eyes and flailed around the pew I was sitting at before I went in the dream state. "JESUS!" I yelled. If I could go back in time and take back saying that name I would. I had forgotten where I was.

I was panting harder than I ever had before. I lay down with my head resting at the end of the bench. When I calmed down a bit I started laughing to myself. "You have a real questionable sense of humor," I said. From this point of view, many would think I was talking to Velvet. But the truth was, I was talking to the man hanging on the cross. I sat up and leaned my body towards the pew in front of me and draped my arms over it.

"I was always told that things happened for a reason, but it turns out that you're apparently the reason things happen. You or your father," I said, talking to the statue.

A deafening silence lingered in the room. I'm not sure what I was expecting from coming here. Some sort of a sign? Some higher being telling me that everything was going to be all right? There weren't any of those things or anything to substitute for it. The only things that made a flicker were the candle flames because of the air-conditioning unit blowing air.

A part of me was hoping that there would be a person that would make a cameo in my life and give some words of wisdom. Some old man that looked like Jack Lemmon that would come in from stage left and set the tone of the rest of my story, but there wasn't. Now that I think about it, that's what makes me so furious. When we're children, our parents tell us that we can be anything we want and our lives can be good if we make it that way. The truth is that we can't. And I think that's what pisses me off the most.

The statue of Jesus in front of me kept on looking down and away from me. As if he was embarrassed that he didn't have an answer.

"Can you do anything besides just hang there?" I yelled. My voice echoed heavily throughout the room. I had this picture in my mind of some nurse calling security. "We try and do the best we can, and when help is needed you do nothing," I continued, "And you probably wonder why this world is falling!" I started to pace

up and down the aisle. “What did I do?” I asked the statue, “What did anyone do to deserve this?”

I stopped myself from saying anything else I may have regretted later. I probably already bought my ticket to Hell. What difference did it make? I was already in the worst Hell that any being could ever bestow upon me.

I sat back down on the right section of pews and remained on the aisle side. I thought to myself for a while before I made my way back into the halls of the hospital. I needed a cigarette, and I wanted one so badly. I took out the Zippo lighter that I had since I was twenty years old and played with the lid, listening to the clicks it made. I never thought I had nervous habits but at that point I started to believe that I wasn’t any better. I wanted to light it but I had seen way to many shows where a guy goes to light a cigarette and blows up the hospital. I didn’t want to be that guy. Maybe some sort of circumstance would come up where that may come in handy. *I’ll put that trick in my back pocket.*

I started to fall asleep. It wasn’t a good sleep either. It was one of those kinds of sleeps where you can still hear what’s going on around you. Those are the worst. Maybe I’m different, but when I go to sleep I want to get away from all the chaos of my life for eight to ten hours, maybe more. Even with the prayer room’s doors closed, I could still hear the telephones ringing and people walking. The dings that patients make when they need something. The normal sick people, and the people that die from heart attacks or diseases. I think part of me took comfort in the fact that anyone who dies here would stay dead and not come back with fangs. That gave me half an erection thinking about it. *Peacefulness turns me on.* I’m such a head case.

My eyes opened to the sound of the door opening behind me. I knew it was Allen. I could hear his breathing from a mile away. Poor guy doesn’t breathe through his nose half the time. Maybe he should get that taken care of. *Narrow nostril syndrome.*

He stopped in the middle of the room to look for me in the dark. I know this because when he stops and is confused, he actually breathes through his nose and it may be louder than when he does it through his mouth. I kept one eye open to see when he would finally get to my row. He found me after a couple of seconds.

“Never figured you to be the praying type,” Allen said.

“I’m not,” I replied, “It was the only place I could take a nap.” That was a lie. Even in times of uncertainty I have my shell up and around me. *Why do I do that?*

Allen leaned up and tried to look at me in the eyes. “Why does it take forever to get things done in a hospital?” I asked, “Seriously, we’ve been here forever just to get a blood test.”

“Would you give me a break?” he asked.

I threw my hands in the air admitting defeat. I saw his knee bouncing up and down. I knew that he had something serious to ask. It must be another nervous habit, when Allen needs to get serious, he gets nervous.

“So,” Allen continued, “what kind of stunt are you trying to pull on me?”

I cocked my head to the side as if I didn’t know what he was talking about. I was going to get the whole spiel on how Solstice’s heart isn’t beating and why her boobs just grew in a matter of hours.

“I did a blood test on your little girl friend,” he said. *So he hasn’t been back to the room yet and seen her...changes.* “To be quite honest,” he continued, “I don’t know how she’s still alive.”

Of course you don’t. I glanced down at the paperwork, only to realize that I didn’t know what the hell it said.

“Her white blood cells are almost non-existent, and she’s completely anemic. I don’t understand how she’s even walking!” he quietly yelled.

“Let’s pretend that I don’t know what any of that means...oh wait, I don’t know what any of that means. Just tell me what the hell is going on.” I replied.

Allen clenched his jaw shut trying to figure out how to put it into terms that I would understand, or words that wouldn’t upset me.

“Gav,” he said sincerely, “your friend in there has a case of full blown AIDS.” I slouched in my seat and put my hands on my forehead.

The one thing that I hate and have worked so hard to stop is at my side and wants my help. Allen kept talking about the symptoms and the facts, but all I could think of was if I should end her non-existent life and get it over with. *What did she need her life for anyway? It would be easy. Just go in her room, take one of the*

SOLSTICE

silver chains, wrap it around her neck, and pull. It would probably burn right off.

Shit! How could I justify that? Killing off something that had nothing to do with the state she was in? I can't do it, not again.

CHAPTER 13

I usually enjoy these calmer moments before the storm. It usually brings me a sense of mind. A perspective of sorts. Before I broke into a woman's shitty apartment or hotel room to deprive them of a life full of murder and chaos, I pumped myself up by giving myself a nice little pep talk. 'This is what God had planned for you and may your vengeance be harsh. You are protecting others that are like you and those who aren't. I am giving others a chance.' That's what I told myself.

This particular quiet moment wasn't like that. I walked down the white corridor with adjacent rooms for the sick. *Who was I kidding?* There was no hope. Not for myself or anyone else. I'm just one man with nothing left to lose. Perhaps that's why I've kept Solstice near me this entire time. I had lost hope with everything else, and maybe this little girl could restore any faith I had left.

This walk was the path to the truth. After this moment with Solstice, nothing would be the same for me. Not that I had a lot going for me in the first place. She was going to tell me something that I didn't want to hear and something that was going to make me a different person than what I have been these past few years.

I walked past the entrance and saw that it was starting to sleet. *Odd, it doesn't do that until January.* I looked at the nurses at their station on my left. One of the ladies came from behind the counter and stopped to talk to me.

"Your daughter's physician transferred her to the second floor for more tests," she had said. I looked down at her nametag. It read

'Dawn'. *That's fitting, the one time of day I wish were happening right now.*

Dawn was nice. She was very petite and had big blue eyes that could peer into someone's soul and pull out all the bad they were feeling. She was attractive in the way that someone would feel bad if they took advantage of her after a night of heavy drinking. Under normal circumstances I would have had a quick thought about taking her against the wall and nailing the hell out of her and the little pink knitted sweater she wore over her uniform, but I didn't. It was too exhausting to even fathom the idea. I didn't have anything left in me to desire.

She gave me the room number and I told her, "Thank you." *That may have been the most sincere 'thank you' I had ever given.* Whatever would make my life easier, at least for the moment?

I staggered to the elevator like one of the walking dead. I had no idea who I was anymore or what my purpose was. Everything I knew and believed had changed. Just one thing, in a matter of a few seconds, changed my plans. *It was like I had just become a dad again.* The concept had never occurred to me. Solstice wasn't my flesh or bone, but she relied on me like my daughter did.

Still, these crap weapons I thought of on a whim weren't going to do anything for me unless I knew what I was fighting against, and for. Time seemed to slow down for me as I rode the elevator to the second floor. I was too tired to even want to ask what was coming for us. Did it matter in the long run? Had I had my revenge as much as life allowed me to have? *These next few moments were going to be defining.* I knew as much, and I think Solstice knew as much too.

The elevator chirped, signifying that it was time to get off. I was hoping it was another floor. But there was no floor between the first and second. I leaned against the chrome bars in the elevator and took a deep breath. I could see her room on the left. Everyone else that was in their respective rooms casted some sort of shadow. I didn't know if she could cast a shadow or not. I thought she did, but it felt ominous that hers didn't. I continued to slowly walk down the hall.

To the right, nurses were eating cake in honor of someone's birthday. The cake read *'Happy Birthday, Brooke'*. I was glad someone was having a good time. The cake was chocolate with

white icing. Nothing fancy. In retrospect, I'm not even sure why I cared. It may have been because I hadn't eaten cake in two years and I was craving a sugar rush to wake me up.

I passed the nurses at their station. They hadn't a care in the world. They sat and laughed while eating grocery store bought cake, not knowing or realizing the danger that may await them when they leave to go home. Their laughter faded away as I approached the room that Solstice was in, Room 222.

I ran my fingers across the walls leading to the door, and wondered how long it had been since they had been washed. I felt oiliness on my fingers when I retracted my hands. I looked at the room number sign and glanced at the brail underneath the room number. *Lucky bastards*. Is it better to know what's going to kill you, or just be ignorant and let it be a surprise?

I peered into the room like a spy to see what Solstice was doing. I expected her to be confused, scared, or maybe anxious to leave. To my surprise, she was looking down her hospital gown at herself. I figured she knew I was staring at her, so I proceeded to walk in.

"My boobs look great," she said, excitedly. *Not the first words I expected to hear*. I grinned a little while walking in. "Want to see?" she asked. I didn't find that question amusing, but I think she actually meant it. She had a smile on her face while obsessing in her great moment.

"No," I said, exhaustedly, "I saw enough earlier."

She still smiled while calling me a pervert. She found that amusing. She didn't care what was happening. It was almost like she knew that this was going to happen.

I leaned back in the uncomfortable red leather chair. I put my hands on top of my head. *This was the uncomfortable part; not the rapid aging or the vampires attacking, and not the people who have died*.

"Its truth time," I said calmly, "you haven't been too honest with me and I need answers if we're to go on." I thought that was a fair enough trade given the circumstances.

Solstice looked down at the sheets of the bed before she said, "What do you want to know?"

Her voice was deeper for sure. It had a hint of a southern accent in it whereas before it was more of a mid-western accent. The

peculiar thing was that even though I knew about the changes, I still saw her as she was. It was like having a child. No matter how much she changes, you still perceive them as they were when they were younger.

“Let’s start with what the hell you’re hiding from first, and why other vampires go ape shit over your blood?”

She started to twiddle her thumbs around, trying to prepare herself for the answer she was about to give. “There’s something about me that they want, and when I bleed it just intensifies their lust for it,” she answered.

“Why? What?”

“They know by the scent, that by feeding off me they can walk in the daylight like I can,” she said.

“Okay, that doesn’t explain who is after you.”

“A man,” she continued, “a man who wants nothing more than others like him. He wants me for the same reason all the others do. Except he’s patient and will experiment on me to make the effect last for others.”

“How is he doing this?”

“He takes women that sell their bodies and makes them. He’s the vampire you have been tracking, in a way,” she explained to me. This is the part where I sat up in the seat and listened hard.

“Why them, couldn’t he just do that with anyone?” I asked.

“They’re the ones that can spread it faster,” she replied. “When the original vampire turned, he had what you know as AIDS in his blood stream. The AIDS didn’t go away. It still stays in his blood stream. When he bites the prostitutes, the AIDS carries over with it as well as the turning to, well, vampires.”

Then the truth hit me like a ton of bricks. “So when they screw other people as part of their profession, the disease carries along with the turning of the innocent. It’s all part of the package,” I gathered.

“Yes, and it just goes on and on,” she replied. This whole time I thought it was just a coincidence that they were all hookers. It wasn’t. It was all part of a plan.

“I’m sorry,” Solstice said, while tearing up. I didn’t respond right away. After looming over this for the last several years, the answer came to me from a child. *Wait.*

“How does this man know about you?” I asked. This is the part that was making her uncomfortable. She started to shiver and it wasn’t because it was cold. Her breathing was getting heavy and her eyes started to glaze over with tears.

“He’s my maker.”

This is the part where you put your seats in their upright position.

“Come again?” I asked.

“He bit my mother while she was pregnant with me, and when that happened I became what I call a half and half. I have the abilities that a vampire has, but I get to play in the sun. Something they want more than anything else in the world, more than blood sometimes.”

This is the other part of the puzzle that was solved before I even asked the next question. Not that I needed to, Solstice knew what it was.

“I have AIDS as well,” she admitted.

That’s why she’s weak sometimes. I started to wonder about her ability to get around and her longevity. “Will you die?”

“No, I will never be one hundred percent vampire in terms of strength all of the time, but I’m still a vampire,” she explained.

A huge rush of relief came over me, but to this day I questioned if was from the fact that she wouldn’t die or that I didn’t have to worry about taking care of a weakling.

“Does this master vamp have a name?” I asked. She looked at me as if she was surprised I cared. “You either give me a name or I just keep calling him master vamp,” I continued.

“His name is Leland, and he is one vampire you don’t want to mess with,” she answered, with great conviction.

“Why?” I retorted. I had a feeling that the answer would be ‘because he’s as old as dirt and he’s too powerful’, but the answer I received was so basic it was almost disturbing.

“He can’t die.”

“Sorry?” I said, waiting for her to clarify.

“People have tried, but no one knows how to kill him,” she replied.

“Well...shit,” I said, dumbfounded. *That doesn’t make any sense. How can one vampire not to be killed like any other?*

“There have been attempts made,” Solstice said, like she was reading my thoughts, “people have tried crucifixes, holy water, silver, beheading, and stakes through the heart, but no one has succeeded.”

I slouched down in my seat and covered my eyes. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I'm not a super hero, I'm a sham. I'm the biggest chicken shit that claims to be a bounty hunter or vampire killer. I kill people who are turning, not fully fledged vamps. I'm a parody of myself. I dye my hair and wear the big black coat to give the illusion that I'm some bad ass that no one should mess with. *How can I protect her? Why did she cling on to me? She has the power. If anything, she's protecting me.*

“How do you expect me to help you?” I asked. She turned her head towards me but didn't answer. “I can't help you. I can't save you,” I expressed, “I couldn't even save the people that relied on me the most.”

“It's not your fault,” she said.

At that point I had my head in my hands, trying to make some bad headache go away. I looked up and exhaled while leaning back in the red leather chair that I was pretty sure came from the 70's. I chuckled to myself. “What do you know about me?” I asked, “You just met me.”

“I know enough. Enough to understand why you're doing the things you do,” she answered.

“Really?” I said, “I am all ears.”

Solstice shifted in her bed and got ready to talk. “It was the night you decided to have drinks with friends from your work. You stayed out way longer than you thought you would. Somebody in your work got promoted, so drinking in a public setting seemed like the thing to do.”

“Around one in the morning you came stumbling out of your car that was parked in your driveway. You didn't notice. You walked up to the front door fumbling for the keys in your pocket. When you started to put the key in the lock you noticed that the door was open.”

“This sobered you up very quickly and your adrenaline started to rise. You slowly opened the door, and before you walked in, you looked around the hallway leading up to the kitchen in the back. You had a very nice home. You had the hardwood floors

downstairs with the modern home décor one usually finds at the local furniture place. You were fans of solid colors, not floral or striped designed furniture.”

“You slowly crept into the house and took off your coat and hung it on the rack next to the door. You walked back towards the kitchen, but not before you placed your keys on the table in the hallway with the big mirror above it that was enclosed with a pewter frame. You glanced at the mirror, and for a moment you thought you saw a child running in the family room across from you. You leapt around to see, but nothing was there. You took it as the booze affecting your head and you continued to walk into the kitchen. The white tile in the kitchen made it bright enough to see without having to turn on the lights.”

“At this time of night the moon gave you enough light to see. Nothing struck you as odd, so you shrugged it off and went back the way you came. While walking to the stairs you glanced in the living room again. You shoved your shoes off using the other foot and walked quietly up the stairs. Trying to avoid a fight was in your biggest interest. Megan was a big advocate of calling if you were going to be late, which you didn’t do that night.”

“Usually you’re good about calling, but that night it just slipped your mind. The creaks were loud as you went up the stairs but there was nothing really you could do about it. The house was old. You got up the stairs and sighed. You didn’t wake anyone up.”

“You walked down the hall to the right and sat on the bed and watched your wife sleep. You took off your clothes and put on a t-shirt and your favorite plaid pajamas. You liked how the blue, grey, and black went with everything you owned. Megan always thought that was the greatest and gayest thing about you. Your fashion sense. It was hard to find in a straight man.”

“You pulled the sheets over you when you lay down next to her. It was cold out and a little chilly and you wanted the warmth from her body to heat you up. The problem was that she wasn’t warm. There was nothing but cold emanating from her. You sat up, leaning on your left arm asking if she was feeling okay. She didn’t answer. You noticed that the bed felt wet, but didn’t concern yourself with that. You spoke to her again and nothing was said back. You put the back of your hand on her forehead. She was cold like you thought.”

“Her head started to lean into the pillow and you kept your hand on it, following it. Then her whole head turned into the pillow. You took your hand away and feared that she was sick and mad at you, or both. Then her head turned towards you and her eyes were open. ‘How long has she been awake?’ you asked yourself. Her eyes were sad. Not judgmental like you thought they would be. Her eyes looked as if she was asking you ‘Why? Why did you not come home like you usually do?’ Then her head rolled over again and again, until it fell to the floor.”

“You tried catching it like a football. Like it was going to change the fact that her head was torn off. You found yourself lying over her body on top of the comforter. You still had your hand reaching out to her. Your eyes started to tear up as you came to the realization that she was dead.”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! You yelled into the night and asked why. You damned God while doing so. You wanted to cradle her severed head, but didn’t. You were just fixated on the Ghostbusters shirt that she was wearing when she died. You knew that you needed to calm down and call the police, but it was easier thought of than done.”

“You turned your head to the left and noticed a shadowy figure in the doorway. Dana was watching you with a pink princess nightgown on. She loved pink. You put your hand up and told her to go back to her room, but she stood there with her finger in her mouth.”

“You yelled at her again at the top of your lungs to go somewhere else. She smiled at you. She didn’t look right. Her eyes were dark, like all the color in her was drained. She giggled and walked into the room smiling. She watched you as she walked to the other side of the bed.”

“From the floor, all you could do was watch her feet before she climbed up onto the bed. She popped her head out from over the bed and smiled at you. Fangs had emerged from her gums and she pulled the sheet back all the way to reveal the rest of her mother’s body. To this day you think it was to mock you. She then started to lick the sheets where the blood spilled out.”

“You looked down and noticed that you also had Megan’s blood on your hands and clothes. You scooted up the wall and shimmied over towards the door. You expected your daughter to

chase you down, but she didn't. You ran down the upstairs hallway and scurried down the stairs."

"You knew you had to find a weapon of some sort. You and Megan didn't allow guns in the house so the next closest thing you could think of was one of the Samurai swords you collected. You ran into the living room and grabbed your sharpest one; the one in the leather case. You thought about it for a second and realized what needed to be done. There was a vampire in your house, and it needed to be stopped."

"You waited on the foot of the stairs for her. You listened as she feasted on what was left of your wife. The slurping and flesh tearing stopped and light footsteps emerged. The house was so old you could hear everything that was going on. Dana came to the top of the stairs. You asked her how she could do that to her mother. She replied that she was dead anyway and it would have been a waste."

"This is so much better daddy," Dana said, "You feel more alive than before!"

"You didn't say anything to her. You watched her slowly walk down the stairs and listened to her trying to convince you. You stopped to listen to the wind chimes for some reason. That was the most relaxing thing to help your mind think."

"Okay, you said, while putting your arms out to hold her. You just wanted to touch her. She came down close enough so you could grab her side and pull her towards you. 'You will always be my little girl,' you told her."

"As she got closer to your body she screamed in pain. She didn't realize you had your blade up while bringing her towards you. The sharp metal pierced through her body and her heart."

"NO DADDY!" she yelled, and that was when you came to the realization that you were destroying your own daughter. You watched with your mouth open and tears running down your face as she wilted away into nothing."

"You grasped as much as you could of her as she disappeared, but it all just turned into ash. While the ash settled, all the memories of your now former life came back. The time you met your wife, your wedding, the day Dana was born, her first steps and first words. It all came into your mind, like watching home movies on a film projector."

“You decided to set your house on fire using what gas you had left in your gas can to fill up the lawnmower in the shed. Eventually, there was nothing left. You rid yourself of, or were deprived of it in one evening. The police just assumed it was arson and that you were in the blaze. No one heard from you again, and everyone told the police that you and Megan were the happiest couple they knew. No foul play was ever thought of on your part. So you disappeared into the air like your daughter did that night.”

When Solstice was done, she had witnessed me bawling like a little boy with a skinned knee. I tried to keep my sobbing down so that others walking by wouldn't take notice. I needed to get composed. I wiped my face with my coat and ran my hands through my hair. Like that was going to do anything to help. My hands were shivering. I couldn't believe that a girl that I just met a few days ago could tell this story better than I could.

I watched her look at me as I tried to contain myself. After her rapid aging episode, her hair grew darker. She was no longer the wise blonde girl I knew for the last couple of days. Solstice was now older and probably still very wise. I had questions about her abilities now. I wondered if she was any stronger, or if the AIDS kept her strength about the same? This wasn't the time or the place to ask such things. She also just had a hospital gown on and nothing else to wear. This was going to be an issue later. Dana didn't even reach puberty when she died, so nothing of hers would fit Solstice. *Wait, she did die...right?*

“I see her playing on a swing set with her other friends,” Solstice said. My head rose up to listen.

“She goes to school and graduates with a 3.5 GPA. She goes to school but not a college like most kids. She enrolls in a directing school because she loves the camera. She meets a nice man who wants to produce films, even though he doesn't understand how it works. They get married and live a very good life,” she continued.

My mind hung on every word she said. My mouth was hanging open, trying to catch the knowledge that Solstice spewed out. “She can't do any of those things now, because she passed away,” she finished. I wasn't sure whether or not to be happy about the life she would have had or not.

“We need to go,” she said.

“What?”

SOLSTICE

At that time I heard a tapping on the window from outside. I stuck my neck out to the left to see what was there. A shadowy image with black hair draped over their face was outside tapping. The tapping was very ominous. *Wait, we're on the second floor!* I jumped out of my chair and Solstice threw the sheets off of her and stood next to me. The person outside looked up, and as they did the hair fell into place. It was a woman. It was Velvet.

She looked at the both of us and grinned. Her fangs came out and a shriek that could shatter crystal came out of her mouth. The bustling of trees outside and the finger nails sliding against brick was getting louder. We covered our ears because they may have bled if we didn't, or we may have just gone deaf.

Solstice looked at me and screamed at the top of her lungs, "RRRUN!!!!"

CHAPTER 14

Solstice and I backed up to the front of the room. Velvet just stared at us, grinning. I was terrified to the point of not having a rational thought. The room started to smell like death. *Is that how I'm going to smell when I die?*

Solstice cowered behind me with her left hand clutching my shoulder. *That really fucking hurt.* The trees outside were still shimmering. There was no telling how many of those things were outside waiting to get in. Velvet kept tapping the glass like she was a cat with a bug, swatting at it, but just wanting to play.

The glass started to crack in the spot where she kept tapping. The spider-web shape of the cracking glass was very intriguing to look at, as if that was the point. To keep us in the room. I glanced down to the bed Solstice was laying on and saw an oxygen mask laying on it. The mask still had oxygen running through it. *Wait. I have been in this room with her for at least twenty minutes while she had that mask off.* The perfect opportunity came around to give us a chance to survive the imminent attack.

If I do this, I run the risk of blowing this floor to kingdom come. But if Solstice has had that mask off for a short time, then the room may be the only casualty. Should I do this and run the risk of killing everyone or does it really matter since they'll probably die from the attack regardless? I stared at the mask while Solstice was trying to pull me back.

“We need to go!” Solstice yelled.

I stood my ground. “Not yet.”

Velvet kept tapping until the glass could be penetrated. During that time, more vampires started peering into the room.

Most were women, but there were men in the group as well. Most of them looked like truckers that needed to blow a load while on the road. Instead they got a hooker with a disease and nasty case of the undead. *Poor bastards*. Some of them had wife beater tank tops on while others were decorated in tattoos and piercings through some orifice of their body.

They hung on to ledges and trees, waiting for the chance to come in and feed. The hissing and even the snarling were deafening. To be honest, I was surprised that no one was walking around trying to find the noise. I suppose the nurses were too busy filling up on cake.

“When I tell you, run to the elevator at the end of the hall,” I told Solstice. She nodded her head because she finally understood what I was going to do. All the episodes of doctor dramas on television over the years have taught me a lot. One of those this was to not light a match or lighter in a hospital room.

I looked at the oxygen mask on the bed and then looked back at Velvet at the window. I pulled out my trusty Zippo lighter and smiled at her with part of my mouth. I flung the lid of the lighter open. Velvet’s smile turned into frown and she dropped from her position outside of the window. The others didn’t take her cue and busted into the room on all fours like cheetah’s ready to pounce on their prey and rip open their carcass. I counted how many were coming in and how many were still hanging outside. *One little, two little, three little vamps*. I processed as many as I could and yelled, “GO!”

Solstice and I ran towards the big wooden door that was already ajar. We made it to the hallway, and before I closed the door I lit the Zippo and flung it inside the room. I shut the door quickly, imagining a raging blast of fire coming through it. I wanted to say something clever at the time while I did it, like ‘go to hell’ or ‘come and get me fuckers’ but I’m not that fast and clearly not all that clever.

Solstice proceeded to run down the hall in her hospital gown. For some reason I stayed and waited. It wasn’t because I was trying to be brave or had the ‘they’re going to have to get by me first’ attitude. I just wanted to see if it worked. By the time I had

the idea to finally run, the explosion happened and I watched an inferno come through the cracks of the wooden door. The explosion blasted the door against me and pinned me to the wall. It knocked me out for a few seconds, but I could hear the screaming of the creatures. I fell in a way that I could see what was happening in what little was left of the room. Bodies were burning, and the vampires were wailing. I looked at what was left of the window and watched the tree and the bodies of vampires wilting away. Some of the fire was sucked outside and took care of more of those creatures than I had planned.

I looked down to the ground and watched as a girl, from what I could tell, crawled towards me while she burned. She couldn't have been more than eighteen years old. Her eyes were the only part of her body that was still unharmed. Her eyes didn't look mean. They looked like they were sorry for this, and that she couldn't help it. I laid down with my back against the wall and my head towards the elevator door on my right down the hall. *I'm sorry that this happened to you.*

For once in my life I actually felt bad. It was either from exhaustion or a soft heart, but I reached towards her trying to grasp her hand. I knew I couldn't save her but I thought maybe she wanted some sort of relief. I touched her hand and then the fire sprinklers came on. The heat from her body was so intense that when cold water hit her body, she imploded and her skeleton fell apart. I was left with fragments of a hand in mine.

Something was pulling me from under the door. "Come on, snap out of it," Solstice said. The creature, no, the girl's ashes put me back into focus. I bent my knees and crawled out of the doorway that encased me. I got on my feet and ran with Solstice down the hallway. Nurses and doctors stared at the fire and us as we ran. "Run!" I yelled, "Save everyone that you can!" By the time the words left my mouth, a spine tingling screech emerged from the room. I slowed down to fumble in my jacket to find my chain.

The nurse's station was coming up our right, and then the human screaming started. I heard cracks and splashing liquids hit the ground. Time slowed down. I watched as Solstice started running on all fours like a puma.

I had to realize the fact that she still was part vampire and had ways of doing things that I could only ever dream of. She hopped

onto the nurse's station desk and then onto the bed that was behind me. Her running on all four appendages was beautiful, almost like an actual cat running for its prey. She was running and hopping from left to right like she was running away from an alligator. Maybe she thought the more nimble she became the less likely she would get caught. Her fangs were out as well. They were longer now than before we came to the hospital. Her muscles were swelled too. It looked like she was training for the Olympics by the look of her leg muscles. She then jumped in front of me and landed on the right wall past the nurse's station. Her feet were flat against the wall as she ran on it.

I had just reached the end of the station and felt something splatter against me. Pieces of birthday cake were flying against me and the wall. *Sorry Brooke, this was a shitty day to have a birthday and work.* Poor Brooke. All she probably wanted was just to go home and relax.

Solstice reached for my arm. I reached out to her, not knowing what she was up to. It was apparent that she was faster than I was. I didn't feel it at the time, but something was wrong with my right leg. It kept me from running as fast as I could have. She pulled her hand away and yelled, "Watch out behind you!"

I'm not sure, to this day, if it was just instinct or if I just wanted to really try it, but I pulled out the silver chain I made using the retractable key chain. My clothes were wet and wearing me down, but I had to make some sort of move to catch the vampires behind me off-guard. I jumped in the air with my chain in my right hand, spun around in a circle, and let the weapon of choice do the rest.

Two vampires, one male with a flannel shirt on, and the other one with hardly any clothes on at all, were right up on me to the point I could smell their breath. *Wanted: Two single vampires in dire need of a breath mint.*

The chain dug through their necks and ripped their heads off their bodies. The weapon test was a success. I finally went one on two with full vamps and destroyed them. It was no time to get cocky.

When I landed on my feet, I fell to the ground in agonizing pain because of my right leg. Once again Solstice reached out and finally grabbed my hand. She single handedly threw me to the elevator. My body was flung like a ragdoll to the other end of the

hall, while Solstice was still running on the wall. When I hit the ground I thought I was at the end of the hallway, at the elevator doors.

“*Sarah pushed the button,*” I heard. Sarah. I knew that name from somewhere before. Something Solstice told me. I took what I heard and thought it may have been exhaustion making me hear things. I rose up and found myself in the elevator as Solstice was climbing in.

I looked at the chaos that was behind me the whole time, at the nurses lying on the floor in pools of their own excrement and blood. Papers from the patient’s files and charts were strewn across the floors, and some were still flying in the air. The light fixtures were hanging down from the ceiling, swinging back and forth.

Vampires were dragging people from their rooms and wheelchairs to feed on. I could hear the sucking sounds coming from various places in the hospital. No one had a chance. *I should have just let the door stay open when I flung the lighter. It wouldn’t have mattered.* I guess that choice was what made me human. I heard pleas to Jesus and God from victims getting the life sucked out of them. I wanted to help, but it would have been suicide.

The water was cascading down the walls at this point. The sprinkler system was flooding the floor. The fire was still going strong at the other end of the hallway. I wanted the water to wash all the blood away, but it wouldn’t. There was too much. Then she appeared.

Velvet came walking down the hall marveling in the disaster she created. Her hair was in front of her face, wet and stringy. Her walking pace was slowing, almost intimidating. She had something in her arms. She was cradling something. I could hear nursery music for some reason. Solstice looked at me while pressing the button to get to the first floor lobby. The door wasn’t closing when it needed to. It was luck that the elevator was open; I figured that it wouldn’t shut.

I heard cooing coming from Velvet’s direction. The music was still playing in my head. “*Rock-a-bye baby on the tree top; when the wind blows....*,” I sang to the tune in my head. I looked at Solstice and she stared at me. Solstice put that song in my head.

Velvet got closer and closer to the door. *Goddammit...she has a baby in her hands.*

Velvet looked up at us. Solstice was still banging on the buttons for the door to close on the elevators. I could see her face and the shit eating grin she had on it. It was hopeless at this point. Velvet started walking into the elevator and Solstice and I rose to our feet with our backs against the elevator wall. *Ding!* The elevator doors shut behind Velvet. *Perfect, that couldn't have been less convenient.*

“You have given me such a hard time,” Velvet said. I heard the baby yawn in her hands. She looked down at the baby and smiled. “This is the last stop,” she continued. She walked up to me and put her face in front of mine. “Did you really think you were going to win?” Velvet asked.

Solstice backed away in the corner of the elevator like she would blend in like a chameleon. “Things change,” I said. Velvet’s fangs came out as she hissed at me.

The baby started to scream when she did that. It was a scream that only a baby could belt out. A scream and whimper that could bring anyone to tears. I clenched my jaw muscles.

“Go ahead,” she said, “be frightened!” I looked to the left and saw Solstice reach into the little pocket on her hospital gown. “You humans taste so good when you’re scared!” Velvet yelled.

Ding. The elevator doors opened but it was the wrong floor. We went up instead of down.

“First I think I’m going to have a little appetizer,” she said.

“You are a demented fucking bitch!” I yelled in her face. The elevator door closed and proceeded to move.

Velvet smiled. “It’s a shame that this little one won’t grow up,” she said, “Don’t you think that it’s terrible when that happens? When a child doesn’t get to grow up and never really gets to appreciate life? I figured you of all people should know.” My fear started to turn into rage.

I could feel the veins in my head pulsating. My fists were ready to go into a fury of punching and choking. Velvet raised the baby over her. The child had a little pink one piece on that said, ‘MY DADDY LOVES ME’. The baby was screaming so hard that its poor voice started to get raspy. Velvet brought the baby down to her level and she started to lunge towards the child’s neck.

There was a change in Solstice at that moment. Her face got wretchedly ugly and her fangs grew longer than before. She was shaking her head like a single thought crossed her mind and she couldn't get it out. Something about the child made her go berserk and for once I became scared of her. The little girl I found in a car a couple of days ago was now a part of my nightmares.

A glass-shattering wail came out of Solstice's mouth that looked like it formed into something more evil than Velvet could ever think of. The wail disappeared but my head felt as if it was going to split into two, like that time in the car on the way to the whore house. The metal inside the elevator started to buckle and the circuitry of the floor board was sparking.

The child started to scream and I saw my surroundings fall apart around me. Deep down I knew that this was an effect of Solstice's mind not having control, but the sheer horror of the imagery around me was enough for anyone to go mad.

The elevators walls, what was left of them, went up in flames, and Velvet started melting on the floor. Her skin and blood started to boil and splatter all over Solstice and myself. The baby cried for its mother and kept on saying, 'it's not fair that I was born', and how it wanted her mommy.

I tried to get a hold of myself, but my eyes were hurting and I couldn't get away from the pain. *'MOOOOOMMMYYYY, DON'T DIE ON ME!!!' Jesus Christ! MAKE IT STOP!* Solstice's inner pain was being projected onto us. Her anger made us want to die. My eyes leaked white liquid and it was pouring onto my hands. My eye matter was in my hands and there was nothing I could do about it. The baby wailed for a mother that was not around, I was going blind, and Velvet's remains soaked all of us.

"Stop this!" I yelled. Solstice showed her fangs at me and roared. "I can't help you like this, let it go for now!" The bones in my body started to break starting with my fingers bending backwards. I screamed in pain and then reality came back into focus.

Velvet stopped and looked around. She started screaming at the top of her lungs. I could see her loosening her grip of the baby and I fell down to my knees right when she dropped it. I caught the child... barely. I watched as Velvet's face turned red. She spun around to look at Solstice. A needle was plunged into her back. I

knew what happened immediately. At some point during the escape, one of my syringes that were filled with bleach got away from me. Solstice must have saw it and picked it up while I was running.

“YOU’RE GOING TO DIE! YOU CANNOT BEAT US!” Velvet screamed. It was time to shut this twat up. I reached back into my pocket and pulled out my chain. I laid the baby on the floor of the elevator and wrapped the chain around Velvet’s neck one loop at a time. I took both ends of the chain. The retractable end and the other end and pulled slowly.

“You feel that?” I asked condescendingly, “Feel the burn? That’s your pride and your miserable existence fading away.” The chain had reached the middle of her throat by this point and Velvet could no longer yell. “Go ahead, be terrified. This is going be so much better when you are afraid.” Velvet’s eyes got big like she wanted to say something, but she couldn’t. Her head fell off of her body. Her torso was sitting upright. I waited.

“Isn’t something supposed to happen when you take their heads off?” I asked Solstice, trying to catch my breath.

“Like what,” she asked. I had a disappointed look on my face apparently.

“Like, don’t they wither away or something?” I retorted. Solstice just shook her head. I guess I had seen too many films and expected something from the fiction. Velvet’s body slowly turned to ash and I sat on the elevator floor enjoying every second of it. I looked to Solstice to make sure her face went back to normal. It did, and for that I was relieved.

The elevator door dinged and we found ourselves in the lobby, where we wanted to be in the first place. I picked up the little girl and found a place to lay her down. It was a portable cradle that nurses used to transport newborns.

The automatic doors were ajar and letting a cold breeze into the lobby. I couldn’t just leave the child without some sort of warm blanket. Some of the gurneys still had blankets on them from when the supposed “sick” hopped out of them and went running for the hills. I grabbed the blanket from my right and quickly covered the infant. It was too big for the child but it was enough to keep her warm. I walked away from the child while Solstice waved goodbye

to her. I'm sure that Solstice knew the child couldn't see but I didn't say anything. I stopped to double check on her.

We were out of danger for now. The rest of the hospital staff would find the baby and give her a home somewhere. "I hope you forget today," I said while shaking her little hand. I knew she couldn't see me quite yet, but she grinned at me and fell asleep. That's what mattered most. I almost wanted to take her home. *That's how Dana smiled at me.*

It's fortunate that she will never remember tonight. The sounds that she probably heard should be erased from anyone's memories. All I could think of was how terrifying it may be to be a newborn child in general. All of the sounds that happen around you that you don't recognize, and can't put a picture in your head with.

I knew we weren't out of the woods yet. We needed to leave as soon as we could. Solstice grabbed one side of me and helped me hobble out to the parking lot. There were staff and patients waiting outside looking up at the fire above. The fire trucks and police hadn't arrived yet. Did that whole thing only take a few minutes or was the South Carolina fire and police just that bad? It was probably the second option. The real kick in the ass was that no one would ever realize what actually happened up there. All they would see is the dead bodies and will assume it was from the blast, because the fire will incinerate any trace of mutilation to their bodies. I knew that because I looked above as we walked away and saw that the whole floor went up in smoke. *Is it my fault? It was, and there was nothing I could do about it.*

There will be empty graves and people surrounding them thinking that an accident took their loved ones instead of evil. That's the worst part of all, not knowing the truth about the world you live in. There is evil out there, and it doesn't give a fuck who you are or how good you may be.

We walked out with no attention being paid to us. We managed to find the piece of shit that most would call a 'car'. We hopped in and let out a sigh of relief. We both knew more were coming, and that they would follow us for the next couple of days because of Solstice's menstrual cycle. I started up the car with no hassle and we drove off into the night, not knowing where we were going. The only thing that I did know was that damn hole in the roof of the Geo was still there, and I was freezing by balls off. It was

snowing and I didn't even know what day it was. It could have been Christmas for all I knew.

We drove onto highway 85 going north. We didn't have much gas so we needed to find a place that was desolate and as far away from people as possible. We got onto the 110 highway from 85 and took a left. We rode into a town that only had one stoplight and plenty of farmland. Solstice didn't talk the entire time, and neither did I. I spent a lot of time looking back on the day, and yes, it had been a twenty-four hour period. Give or take.

I looked down at myself and the black clothes that I wore today. *What am I talking about?* I wear these clothes every day, and for what? I started this senseless brigade because I had nothing left to lose and I wanted to be someone else; someone that I didn't recognize anymore. In that search for a new persona, I created this shell of a person that people talk about in passing and make others afraid of. But when it all comes down to it, I was the one that was afraid. I was the pussy in this whole quest. I took hookers and killed them before they even knew what they were, for a cause that had no end. Until today, I never came into contact with a fully turned vampire and I still don't know how I survived it.

My focus needed to change. I'm responsible for a life now. A person who has a monster's abilities in the shape of a, well, teenager. I don't know why she attached to herself to me out of all of the people in the city. Maybe it was her imaginary angel that she claimed to see, Sarah.

"She just turned twenty five years old," Solstice said.

It took me a minute to realize that she was talking. I was too busy in my own head.

"What?" I asked.

"The nurse who had the birthday," she replied. Funny, out of all the things I was thinking about, she chose to answer that question. I just nodded my head and went on watching the road. After several miles I came to a conclusion in my mind given the circumstances.

I looked Solstice up and down, at her new body that had formed in the span of minutes and wondered what other dangers would come about with this new metamorphosis. If this was her becoming a woman, does that mean that I will have to look forward to raging hormones or perhaps the woman's deciphering

game? The one where she says one thing but really means another? I thought I would never have to go through that after my daughter's death, but it seems that God or some higher power has a plan.

"There's something else you're not telling me," I stated. Solstice slowly looked at me. She didn't ask what it was, but waited for the question. I wanted to believe that this was a random event with puberty gone amuck, but I was afraid it wasn't.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve years old," she replied, "I told you that." There was nothing convincing about her answer.

"Let me ask again," I said hastily, "How old are you...really?" She started to bounce her foot in a nervous type of twitch.

"One week," she answered.

There was a part of me that wanted to cry. It was just one more goddamn thing to have to deal with. There was no telling what this girl was going to be like. The hormones alone would complicate things since they're probably bouncing all over the place. It's like taking care of a bi-polar raccoon. One minute it looks cute, the next it's biting your face off. When it came right down to it, she was still a vampire. And what would happen if that part comes out of her more? Will she resist the urge to feed?

We came up to an old house that looked like an old plantation home. It seemed like it hadn't been taken care of in years. However, there was something familiar about the house. Something I had seen before. We walked up to the front door and jimmied the lock to get in. There was no power in the massive house, not surprisingly. The good news was that furniture was still there with plastic covering on it. Solstice went to look for something that we could light. Not sure how, my lighter was gone.

She came down with a couple of candles and a box of matches that were probably so cold and damp that they wouldn't light. I kept the front door open to get some light in from outside even though it was still night. Perhaps the matches would work. Solstice struck the match on the side of the box and it illuminated the room.

A growling sound came from the front door. I turned around and watched as a figure ran up towards the door. The sound got louder and more violent sounding the closer it got. Solstice dropped the match in fear of what was coming. We both knew, but

we didn't want to believe it. Not this quickly anyway. I saw the sharp fangs getting closer.

The vampire, a man that looked like he was maybe in his mid-forties came rushing at us, increasing speed each second that passed. I reached for the door to shut it but it was too late. The vampire had crossed the threshold and started to attack me. I fell to the floor ready to fight for my life until he started convulsing with pain. I pushed him off and watched him start to die.

He didn't yell or scream. Blood started to bleed out of his facial orifices. His eyes were filled with blood and more came from his nose and ears. Even more started to come out of his pores. This middle aged vampire was bleeding to death. He finally died on the floor of the entranceway.

After watching, what appeared to be a fairly well groomed male, bleed to death; both Solstice and I started to examine the body. His eyes were a hazel color and he had dirty blonde hair. He was wearing clothes that you would buy from the local mall at one of those name brand shops. You know the ones, Abercrombie or Express.

Strange, a man that seemed older than what he was dressing as came out of nowhere. I still had to assume that Solstice was still riding the crimson wave and that we were still going to be targets as long as she was bleeding. Her smell was like cocaine to these vampires, and they seemed like they would stop at nothing to get to her.

The blood of the vampire that busted in still soaked the hardwood floor of the house like a bad memory. The blood however could be cleaned up and the floor made to look as good as new. Well, as good as it can for this old shit hole of a house.

Solstice stood and stared at the pool of blood. It was dark in color, but perhaps that was because we still didn't have a lot of light coming in yet. She didn't think I noticed but I saw her fangs come out. She looked at me from the corner of her eyes and took her fingers and pushed them back into her gums. That was the answer I needed to what I would be facing later on down the road.

Solstice and I both stared at the body, in shock. "This doesn't make any sense," she said.

Without moving my head I asked, "You're telling me?"

“A vampire can’t walk into someone’s home without being invited,” she continued.

”But this isn’t our home. So why did he die like it was?” I shrugged my shoulders and told her it was a blessing, and that we shouldn’t bitch about it. That didn’t seem to matter. Solstice’s mind was going a million miles per hour. How could something that is well known; at least in vampire lore, just not be true anymore? I understood. I would have been wondering the same things myself if I weren’t so relieved. I decided to throw the body down into the basement.

I sat back in an old recliner that had a footrest that comes up when you lean back in it. The blast of dust coming out of it when my rear slammed into was a bit staggering, but then again, why should I have been surprised by it? Who would have thought that I would be so happy to be in an old dump house? It was apparent that we were going to have to stay here for a few days and let Solstice’s body come around naturally.

Solstice took the cue and went upstairs to find some clothes to wear. I rested my back and fell asleep; at least for a couple of minutes. I heard her rummaging through what sounded like drawers upstairs.

I want to note that this is my last entry in this notebook. I can’t continue this anymore. The only reason I have to this point is because I’m stuck in this hellhole house for at least five days. I thought this place was safe, and it is in a way. There was something else going on; something that I can’t explain yet. Maybe I’ll stay alive to continue this, or maybe someone will find this and continue my story through other people’s accounts of the events that will probably transpire.

I just wanted to say that I am not a great man, nor am I a brave one. I just have nothing else to lose at this point besides Solstice and my own mind. She’s special and that is obvious. She’s the key to helping me finish my work and stopping the spread of AIDS to innocent people, not to mention those same innocent people becoming vampires. That sounds selfish, and maybe it is. She’s worth fighting for, and with. And it’s nice to have a female around

again. Solstice has been alone for too long, and as far as I am concerned she never will be again.

I hope this is found, and I hope the story gets told one way or the other. It deserves to be known, and it's not my vanity coming into play. That ship has sailed. People deserve the truth. And they have a right to know about the dark things in this world.

-Gavin Moxley

EPILOGUE

Gavin woke up in the middle of his sleep in wonder of what had happened to his brother in law, Allen. He quickly sat up in a cold sweat and started to catch his breath. He wanted some sort of closure to the situation tonight, but he knew it wasn't going to happen. His head fell back into the cushion of the chair. It was cold and the air was stagnant. He felt a pair of arms wrap around his neck and rest on his chest.

"I know it's going to be okay for a couple of days. I just need to rest and make a plan," he said. He touched the arms around him and found that they were cold. Gavin started to rub his hands against them quickly to warm them up. "I know this probably is a frivolous attempt, but I guess it's just some sort of instinct," he explained.

Solstice's voice asked, "Who are you talking to?" Her voice was coming from upstairs. Gavin's eyes grew larger realizing he was not touching Solstice. He slowly turned his head around to the right. He saw strands of black hair over a child's face. The eyes were pale blue and dead looking. A sweet voice came out of the child but not the mouth. It was like an echo through the house.

"Hi daddy!" the familiar voice said. Gavin knew the voice and hoped it was all just a bad dream. He flung his body out of the chair and looked as his deceased child walked out from behind the chair in slow-jerking motion. Her hair was covering her face and she started to walk towards Gavin with her hands out, wanting him to come closer. Gavin fell to the floor and scooted his body across

the hardwood floor to the wall nearest him. He closed his eyes and whispered for her to go away. This may have been his mind playing a dirty trick on him, and if it was there was no need for Solstice to get involved any more than she needed to.

“Da...addy,” Dana’s silhouette whispered. Gavin kept his eyes shut, but what he couldn’t see was that his dead child kept coming up closer to his face until she couldn’t get any closer. He could feel a cold mist on his face. She was breathing on him.

“Jesus Christ, please...don’t do this to me...not now!”

THE END...

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Bryan W. Dull was born in Anderson, Indiana in 1979. He has lived in numerous areas like Spartanburg, South Carolina (which 'Solstice' is based from), North Carolina, and Florida. He currently resides in Cincinnati, Ohio with his wife and child. This is his first official novel but not his first story.