

An aerial photograph of a city, likely New Orleans, is shown with a heavy, dark red overlay that resembles blood splatters. The splatters are most concentrated in the upper right and lower right corners, with some smaller droplets scattered across the cityscape. The city features a river, bridges, and various buildings.

# Butterfly Dawn

Some vacations change you forever



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'  
ON OCTOBER 19th 2019



# Butterfly Dawn

written as a  
Novel-in-a-Day



# BUTTERFLY DAWN

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Cassandra Lee Yieng, Noé Ramalleira Fernández, Victoria Griesdoorn  
Alex Brantham, Ron Ward, Conrad Gempf  
Amy E Lilly, Emily Thrash, Jaysen O'Dell  
Matthew Schillinger, Marc Cooper, Dañiel Garcia  
Waleed Ovase, Dan Hallberg, Julia Ward  
SR Martin, Kaide Li, Pete Becker  
Marilou Goodwin  
Story by: Tim Rogers

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# **Time is no substitute for talent**

There is a well-known saying that if you give a monkey a typewriter and an infinite amount of time then it will eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare. In 2003, the staff at Paignton Zoo gave a computer to six crested macaques and categorically proved that what you actually get is five pages of the letter 'S' and a broken keyboard. Time, it seems, is no substitute for talent. But can talent substitute for time...?

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in October 2019. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it's simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have most of the rest of the day to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as we loved putting it together.

**Tim**

October 19, 2019





# Butterfly Dawn



## chapter one

*Cassandra Lee Yieng*

KATE PULLS UP A chair next to my desk. “You haven’t touched your coffee. That’s unusual of you.”

I wrap my palm around my mug; it’s cold. “I’m thinking of visiting Craig this Easter.” Craig’s girlfriend dumped him earlier this week and it might be nice to keep the poor boy company.

“Why Crystal Palace, of all places?”

I exhale audibly through my nostrils. “Do you expect him to travel to Broadcasting House all the way from our village every day?” Craig keeps the sound systems running while BBC’s presenters go on air.

“For all you know, he could have worked for BBC Wales...”

I shrug. Craig may have managed to realise his ambitions as a broadcast engineer, but mine was cut short at nineteen, however much I like designing posters and flyers at my current job. We’re determined not to return to Wales, where career prospects are dim. Yet another war of words, especially with a friend, would have cemented the sorry state of this miserable

day.

“... with me in Paris?”

I give her puppy eyes, hoping she doesn't know I haven't been listening.

“Zoe?”

“But Notre Dame...” Earlier this week, the ancient cathedral was on fire and made the headlines.

“There'll probably be more cops, that's all. Besides, April isn't particularly hot. Prob'ly around 10°C. It'll be fine.” Kate's eyes dart about. Hopefully no one else at the office has been eavesdropping. “Just so you know,” she whispers, “I'm bringing my motorbike.”

I cup my mouth to suppress a squeal. She's never told me she likes motorcycling too. We geek out with the brands and minutiae of our bikes, both Hondas. Kate related to me her adventures on the road since university. On her previous Paris motorbike tour spanning three weeks, she powered through Switzerland, Slovenia, and Austria all the way to Greece before a broken ankle prompted her to return to London by sea. “My worst mistake was forgetting my travel adapter. Going MIA made my parents worried. How was I supposed to know that French sockets differed from British ones?”

I told her about Dad's favourite movie, *The Great Escape*, starring Steve McQueen (to which Kate responds, “I never thought you'd watch oldies!”). The classic motorbike jump scene inspired me and Craig to take up this fascinating hobby (Craig even obtained a licence on dodging suspicious pursuers) the year before our parents passed on. Mum once spotted me in full motorcycle gear alongside Craig. “*Girls don't drive motorcycles, it's not ladylike...*” I try not to recall the moment Steve's character got caught in the barbed wire. I've had enough scares this week.

“At least Brexit’s postponed,” says Kate, “or travelling through continental Europe would’ve been an administrative nightmare. I’m not prepared to overhaul my travel docs.”

“But Craig... I’m the only family’s he’s got. We’ll probably hang out in some bar and bash Theresa May, or zigzag through the Welsh countryside.”

“Nah, he’ll be fine.” Kate knows that I, like my fellow Welsh folk, prioritise family. “At least he’s not a *manchild*.” Some of our married colleagues used the term of endearment to refer to their husbands.

“Sometimes he is.”

Kate smirked. “That *kidult*. I finally saw that video of himself fixing the Bush House clocks some time back.” Bush House was the former BBC headquarters, and at the BBC’s auction of its old broadcasting equipment, Craig bought a couple of broken clocks, did some DIY engineering and restarted them. “Don’t tell him or he’ll consider me a stalker.”

“He won’t mind it if it’s you.” I smirk. “But, back to the biking trip, I’m strapped for cash.”

“Same here. But since I’m the host — blame me for the last minute notice — I’ll pay two-thirds. Okay?”

“Sure.” How often do you get to meet and travel with a fellow female biker?

I have a confession to make: I’m a rather lousy backpacker. I toss my clothes, toothbrush, comb, phone, water bottle, motorcycle gear and who knows what else into my bag with minimal reshuffling. Craig would roll up his towels in his helmet, conceal his electronic gadgets with his clothes, slot his toiletries into the right pockets inside his bag, and still have enough room for energy bars, potato chips, and anything that comes his way. He’s even replaced his hard plastic water

bottle, the transparent one which is now mine, with a collapsible blue silicone pitcher, which he hangs from a carabiner attached to his sack. “To save bag space,” he told me. There’s no way I can be like my neat freak brother. His thinking is too regimented for me.

Kate’s latest message to me: “I’ve booked a shared room with a double bed at the *Radisson Blu Le Metropolitan*, fifteen minutes from the *Arc de Triomphe*. Three nights.”

I reply that I’m making dinner (microwaved pizza) rather than eating out, and I ask her to call me instead. From the oven, I pull out the tray containing my hot dinner, and despite its various toppings, it has no smell. This is weird.

Kate calls me. “There’s a Japanese-themed bar a few blocks down the road. Online, it’s got rave reviews; we’d be idiots not to check that out. Let’s meet at Dover —”

“Isn’t the train faster?” I blurt out. “Direct from London to Paris.”

“We can’t bring motorbikes on the Eurostar without them costing an arm and a leg.”

Gingerly, I take a bite of my pizza. This is the first time I’ve bought this brand. The crust is stone-hard, the cheese holding the pizza together sticks to the top of my mouth, and the capsicum and mushroom slices taste queasy. I should have stuck to the paella I typically buy. At least I love chorizo, and the paella costs the same as this lousy pizza. Sometimes changes suck.

Kate adds, “Unless you prefer rental. I’m chill.”

“The faster we leave London,” I say, “the sooner we’ll feel better after all the ruckus we’ve been through.” I doubt my words, though. Might we feel worse instead?

“I know the ferry’s slower, but it’s got amazing views of the English Channel. The ferry’s from Dover to Calais, and

then we'll make our way to Paris. Actually, come to think of it, is renting bikes really an option?"

I munch down the rest of my unsavoury pizza. No point wasting food bought with hard-earned money. Intermittent clicks punctuate the other end of the line. Multitasking on the computer is a survival skill in the fashion industry and we switch between tasks quickly even when we aren't working. "I'm concerned about bikes I'm unfamiliar with. We know our own bikes like they're our best friends. Plus, rental means we must spend more than we need to." I pause. "Better our own."

Kate replies, "I've sent you transport info on Dover and Calais and Paris, since you don't have much time left."

"Thanks a bunch." I can't be more grateful for such a friend and colleague. It's hard to imagine what it would've been like if we'd searched the web independently and came up with conflicting ideas on transportation. The last thing I want today is that this day ends with another disagreement. "How about travel insurance?" I add.

"I nearly forgot that! Thanks for reminding me."

I also make a brief call to my insurance company. Recalling Kate's woes without a travel adapter, I pick up a suitable one at the hardware store downstairs, and the storekeeper says I'm lucky because it's ten minutes before closing time. After stuffing my new purchase into the squashed pile of clothes in my bag, I double-check my phone and power bank. They're 100% pumped up for a photo-shooting spree all the way across the channel — and beyond. I can't wait to roam the Parisian boulevards starting tomorrow morning.

The ferry departs with a booming siren. As the lamps at Dover shrink to nothingness, I feel guilty for leaving Craig behind.

Kate and I have decided to remove our phone cards and to use only Wi-fi wherever possible, so I won't know what he thinks of my weekend away from London until we've reached the hotel at around nine tonight, or later. The later we check in, the more danger we'll be in. Until I joined the workforce and saw the things that go bump in the night, I'd never understood why my juvenile self was ordered to be in bed by eight.

I lean against the white railing and gaze at the teal waves reflecting the flickers of our ferry's lights. Did Kate mention amazing ferry views? Perhaps she meant daytime, when skies are blue, clouds are white and the sea shimmers in the sunlight. Instead, in the pitch black hemisphere above us, a few lonely stars twinkle amid grey clouds. From time to time, a full moon appears and casts its ghostly spell on the ocean surface, and I cringe at the idea of werewolves. I reassure myself, reminding myself how far away I am from those mythical beasts. I have nothing to fear, except for the woozy sensation in my head and my increasingly droopy eyelids.

We disembark at Calais, board a train to Paris, and reach the hotel at half past nine. I would still be prying my eyelids open and rubbing them furiously if not for the receptionist insisting that she cannot find our booking at the hotel. Thanks to the hotel manager's intervention ("Your print confirmation is from a new Internet platform we're learning to use, the clerk left work early today and missed your booking, please accept our apologies for the inconvenience and oh here's a €10 coupon for the Japanese bar for each of you ladies, well worth going"), we get our keycards and park our bikes in the hotel's basement.



I plop face down on my bed. Kate mutters something about seasickness.

The next morning, I draw the white curtains. They resemble bridal dresses — pure and undefiled by the cares of the world. The Eiffel Tower stands erect outside our window. Sunlight penetrates our translucent curtains and shines brightly into our room. Better still, the aroma of instant coffee wafts from the desk where Kate is sitting. I'm certain a thrilling excursion awaits us.

After breakfast, we ride cautiously along a city route Kate's familiar with. Had we had the liberty of a week or two, Kate says, we could have explored the suburbs, sped up and enjoyed the journey more fully. Yet, instead of experiencing the scents and sounds of nature, I'm surrounded by exhaust fumes and noises, if not honks, from neighbouring vehicles. Under my clothes, my torso melts into perspiration, unlike the leather-jacket-flapping-in-the-wind type of coolness I'd envisioned when Kate told me about this trip. I can't put my disappointment into words. This trip is not meant for me, and I still don't know if Craig harbours ill feelings towards me for my absence. I haven't checked my phone.

At the roundabout at Charles de Gaulle, I swerve by mistake to the left and almost run into a car heading straight at me. I divert to the pedestrian lane and halt. Kate dismounts and shouts, but I can't hear anything. I take off my helmet but someone runs to me speaking in French: a female cop with short black hair and a manly triangular face.

Kate talks to the cop, perhaps to tell her that I don't understand French. The cop says to me in English, "You're fined €90."

I glare at Kate. I'm €30 short, and I don't understand what

traffic law I've broken.

Kate says. "Just do it, or they'll seize your bike. I'll pay the difference."

I pull out my stash of notes from my wallet and Kate hands me €30. I'm afraid we'll have to go hungry tonight and tomorrow since neither of us can afford proper meals anymore. Probably small snacks and light drinks only. After the cop leaves, I replace my passport in my wallet, and I discover there the two €10 coupons from the hotel manager.

"Is this the same bar you told me over coffee?" I tell Kate. "Can't believe it was yesterday."

"Absolutely. We'll probably spend a lil' more on the drink, but I'm sure we won't pay more than an extra €10." Kate has €30 left. Upon returning to our hotel, we'll book tickets back to London by Eurostar and head home this very night. I decide against pressing Kate to honour her promise to pay two thirds of all expenses. I've messed up too much.

As soon as we set foot in the Japanese bar-and-grill, a robotic voice welcomes us with "*Irasshaimase*." The dim amber lighting greets me eerily, like the eyes of the cats in the poster for the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, and the bar table is a slab of smooth black marble, like the background colour of that particular poster. Several customers entering the place don white suits, and Kate says something about the colour's association with certain gangsters in Japan, but I don't understand the mishmash of English and Japanese she's saying.

I order a plate of *otsumami*, a dish consisting of peanuts, spicy green peas, long grains of brown rice and tiny rice crackers, some of which are dotted with or wrapped with seaweed.

Kate says “*sake*” to the bartender.

I interrupt. “Excuse me, but we’re hitting the road later. Tonight. So, no *sake*. Two waters please.” A pang of guilt hits me — I could have ordered coffee instead to help us stay alert. Something might go wrong tonight.

Kate goggles at me, but regains her composure. “Right. Small snacks and light drinks.”

Personally, I’d love to have Campari with 7-up, or Cointreau with pineapple juice, but we both know that we need to ride our bikes back to the hotel before it’s too late, and we can’t risk driving under the influence of alcohol, especially at night with dreary street lamps that provide the illusion of safety. I don’t recall any law against driving under the influence of caffeine, though.

Kate jerks her head and points to my right. A maroon sofa. A solitary blond man in a black leather jacket, like ours. He looks askance to his left, towards the exit. His face looks strangely familiar, yet it’s a recent face, not one that I had known before yesterday. “Mr Creepy’s been peering at us the whole time,” says Kate.

“But we haven’t eaten yet,” I say. “Or drunk water.”

Kate heaves a sigh.

The man narrows his eyes at me — at us — for a brief moment. He taps on his phone. My fanciful thought: could this man be the same person as the policewoman who stopped me earlier today? But her hair was black. Yet they had similar features. Surely I’m hallucinating... but I’m not even drunk.

We polish off our *otsumami*. Kate puts the coupons and cash on the plate, and we go to the washroom, abandoning our tumblers.

The man positions his phone as if to photograph us.

We slink into the ladies’ restroom.

I recall movie scenes in which characters escape through the lavatory. “Kate, do you know how to get out of here by the window?”

“Do you?”

“I don’t have any idea. But if we can wiggle out of here, we’ll mount our bikes much sooner.” We’ve parked them behind the bar. “Let’s start with the windows.”

We lock ourselves into a cubicle. I stand on the covered toilet seat, open a top window meant for ventilation, push myself through it and collapse on the grass. I ignore the pain in my legs. Someone bangs the door of our cubicle. Kate follows me out of the window, and we dash towards our bikes.

Kate’s breathing accelerates. “I can’t start my baby,” she says. She must be fretting how to bring it back to London.

“Ride on mine. I’ll be pillion,” I reply. “Hope we make a fortune and buy another Honda CB1300.” Her bike model.

She grabs the handles of my CB750, and with one last, longing look at her beloved bike, she starts mine, and we zip the streets towards the hotel. In the rear-view mirror, the blond figure—

“We’re tailed,” I tell Kate.

“I’ll find a corner and try to get rid of him.”

But no matter where we turn, we barely breathe a sigh of relief when the man shows up from behind us again. My fuel tank is running low, and we can’t stop to refill without risking our lives. I wish either of us had mastered evasive driving, like Craig has, but it’s too late for it now...

*Piu!* The sound of a gun with a silencer — senses intensify when we’re on the bike, and whispers become deafening. My body tumbles out onto the road into a ditch. I touch my hurting forehead; my fingers are sticky and smell like iron. I’m now Steve McQueen in the barbed wire, running from the

Nazis. Smoke saturates the air I breathe. Holding my nose doesn't ease my discomfort, now that my baby's wrecked too. Please don't let me lose Kate as well, my guide, my colleague, my friend; I might still be able to save her, if only I reach her in time. But if I venture out, Mr Creepy might—

A shadow.

Blond hair.

Blank.

## chapter two

*Noé Ramalleira Fernández*

IT WAS SO COLD. And she had been sleeping flatly on her back, which was odd, and now the back of her neck was hurting. The trapezoid, was it, that muscle? Zoe turned on her left side and tried to snuggle up a bit, and in doing so she grazed her knees against a cold surface. It sent a shiver down her leg. A cold, metallic surface.

When she opened her eyes, she couldn't see anything. She tried to feel for a light switch in the darkness and, whatever she tried to do, her hands kept hitting the same cold, metallic surface, in all directions. She hit her head when she tried to sit up. It was as if she was in a box, or a coffin. She started feeling short of breath, and sweaty, and she couldn't move anywhere, and there was this weight mounting up on top of her chest, and she couldn't breathe. She needed more space, she needed to push those walls back and kick the ceiling up, and she needed to scream.

She started banging on the walls, and wailed up as loud as she could, feeling her cheeks getting heated and red, and the pain building up in her throat, and the drool falling out of her

mouth. She closed her eyes and tensed all her face muscles, as hard as she could.

That felt useful. She screamed again a couple of times, until she felt empty enough not to need it anymore. Her sight eventually got used to the darkness, and she was able to make out the shapes of things and take stock of her situation.

She was lying down on top of a rolling platform, in a compartment the size of a coffin, and the wall at her feet was a door. One could roll out her bed, load her stretcher on it and roll it back in, and then close the door and keep her stored there. She was covered with some waterproof, aseptic blanket. She was in one of those corpse boxes at the morgue.

She grabbed hold of the platform with both hands, and kicked the door as hard as she could. The platform rolled in when she did, running over her fingers. The middle finger in her right hand got stuck under the bearings, and when she finally was able to free it, it hurt like hell.

The door had caved in. It was a quite flimsy aluminium sheet, and the lock had been designed only to prevent it from rattling, so she had basically blew it open. She rolled out and climbed down from her stretcher.

She had torn up a sizable amount of skin in her middle finger when she dragged it out from under the rolling bed. It didn't hurt as much as she thought it would, and it didn't bleed, but the outside of her middle phalanx was flayed raw, and there was this dead rag of skin hanging from the base of her nail. She touched it with her fingertips. Both her hands were shaking, all her fingers mangled and bruised. She extended the skin over the flesh, trying to spread it without a wrinkle, like a bedsheet. Her hands were so numb that it didn't feel hers, it didn't feel real.

She recovered the blanket from inside her unit, and went

out to find someone with whom to talk. It occurred to her that she had to try and talk or make some noise, to let people know she was not a ghost; and then she realized she had been screaming as loud as she could not five minutes before, and nobody had come, so she might be alone.

She went through a swing door, and the lights switched on automatically, illuminating a short, wide corridor which ended in another set of swing doors. It looked like a hospital. Those doors at the end were probably the limit of the morgue area, and there would be people on the other side. But before reaching them, she found another, smaller door to the right, and when she tried, it was open. All the signs by the door were in French, but it looked like a doctor's office.

She found a set of medical scrubs in a sealed bag, and the doctor's cardigan hanging from the back of the chair. She found bandage rolls, and sterile gauzes for the wound. She found a pair of Crocs which were several sizes too big, but would do, and a clock on the wall that marked 4 in the morning. She found a filing cabinet that was locked, but also a set of keys in the top drawer of the desk, and inside the cabinet she found a transparent Ziploc bag with her hotel card and her mobile phone in it. It was written in French: "Hôpital Hôtel-Dieu, AP-HP", and somebody had scribbled her name in permanent marker. "Name of the deceased: EVANS, ZOÉ", she supposed. And she found another bag, just like hers, with Kate's things in it. "Name of the deceased: FISHER, KATE".

That hit Zoe very hard. She slumped down into the chair. She hadn't thought about Kate at all. She must have been by her side all the time, lying next to her. Maybe she'd been banging on her walls, and screaming into her ears.

She might not be dead, either. Zoe had the impulse to find



Kate and wake her up, shake her awake. But if she went back into the storage room and found Kate's body in its box, and it didn't react, that would mean Kate was dead. Zoe couldn't bring herself to do it.

And what if she found someone, as she was intending to do, and explained to them that she had woken up in the morgue? She didn't know what she'd be able to tell the police. She wasn't thinking straight, her hands hurt, she couldn't remember anything from the day before, her best friend was probably dead, but also maybe not, and her French was tentative at best. They'd think she was crazy. She needed to calm down first, she needed to rest. She needed to go back to the hotel.

She found another bundle of keys in the desk drawer, and tried them until one of them open the door for the morgue. The automatic light that switched on only illuminated a three-meter stretch of the corridor around her. So she started walking into the dark, her steps echoing in the long hallway.

She arrived at her hotel almost at the break of dawn, and the first thing she did was closing the blinds and hanging a "Do not disturb" sign on the door because she really, really needed to lay down.

She had been walking for two hours in the dead of the night, dressed in medical scrubs and with the most stupid shoes ever. She was cold, and her feet were cold, and it was probably for the best, because they would be killing her otherwise.

She had been lost for a good portion of the time: she'd crossed the street just when she walked out of the hospital, and suddenly she'd found herself walking through what felt like a narrow, dark maze of Victorian glasshouses, until she'd

found some open space by the river. There, she started walking along the Seine, all the while looking all around for any signs of the Eiffel Tower.

That's what happens in films, right? There's always a window at the back of the scene overlooking the Eiffel Tower. Well, that doesn't happen in real life. There were plenty of monuments and important buildings with nice lights to showcase them, but she hadn't been able to see the Tower until she crossed a bridge, for no good reason, and then realized she had been in an island smack in the middle of the river that had been obscuring her sight of one of the sides of the river, and *voilà*, there was the Eiffel Tower in the distance, as they promise you in every film.

Once she found the Tower, Zoe knew she could go from there to her hotel, and so it was just a matter of walking. Being lost, having to focus all her energy in just one problem ahead, had been a momentary relief. But after finding the Tower, she had to walk alone for two hours, thinking about Kate and her parents, and how Liz'd react if anybody told her, the day after she'd been officially informed that her only daughter was dead, that, hey, turns out her friend wasn't.

She thought about how she knew how to get to the hotel, but she couldn't remember anything from the day before. She tried for almost an hour to remember the last time she talked to Kate.

She probably should turn herself in. Escaping the hospital hadn't been smart. But now it was all done, anyway. She needed a bath, and then she needed to sleep, and then she'd go to the police. Or they'd come knocking once they realized her corpse was missing from the morgue. Whatever. Now it wasn't the time to think about it.

When she was reading herself for the bath, she ripped the

bandages off her finger. It was fine. No blood on the gauze, no flayed skin, nothing. Just a perfectly healthy finger, as if nothing had happened. Zoe raised her hand in the air, to have a better look at it. And then she realized.

She wasn't reflected in the mirror over the sink. The toilet, the trash can, the bandages she'd just thrown in it: she could see everything in the mirror, except for herself. She opened the toilet lid, and watched as it opened itself in the mirror image.

She was definitely not going to turn herself in to the police, or to wait for them there. She quickly got dressed, threw all the money from the baggage, her IDs, and both their credit cards into her purse, and she left the room.

## chapter three

*Victoria Griesdoorn*

MONDAY MORNING.

07:58 am.

Craig feels the strap of his shoulder bag slip. He catches it with his thumb before it can slide down his shoulder. He only takes his eyes off the article he is reading on this phone when the familiar District line train with its red front and red doors rattles into the station.

Craig looks around the platform and sees some faces he knows from years of morning commutes. The man in the suit who could have been his uncle if the man was taller and Craig's mom had had any brothers; the young Asian teenager who gets out after 3 stops; the near middle-aged lady who Craig imagines is a ballet director on her way to one of the London theatres for rehearsal.

As Craig steps into the train, he feels his phone vibrate. The number starts with +33 and seems long. Craig frowns as he plunks himself down in a seat and taps the green button to accept the call.

“Craig Evans,” he says into his device while the train doors close.

“Hello. Good morning. My name is Lefèvre from the Police de Paris. Excuse me to bother you early in the morning.”

The female voice on the other end of the call pauses for a beat.

“Excuse me that I am calling not with good news also. Do you have time to talk?”

Craig’s eyes dart around the train, his eyebrows stitching into a frown again. “Sorry, who is this? What is this about?”

“My name is Elodie Lefèvre. I am from the Police de Paris. The police service in the city Paris. I am calling about your sister.”

Craig cocks his head sideways. Her accent does sound French.

“What about my sister?”

“I am sorry to say we found a young lady deceased. We believe she is your sister. I am sorry to give you this bad news.”

Craig lets out a gust of breath. With a crooked grin and a slow sweep of his head, Craig looks at the two people sitting on either side of him. They don’t look as if anything out of the ordinary is happening.

“I don’t think I heard you right... You think my sister has been in an accident?” Craig asks, almost laughing to himself.

“We found a young lady. We think she is your sister. We ask you that you come to Paris to identify her.”

“Zoe? Dead?”

“We believe so, yes.”

Craig runs his fingers through his brown, thinning hair.

“Surely this is a joke?” Craig scoffs.

“No joke,” says the policewoman patiently. “We want you to come to L’institut médico-légal. The IML. It is in Paris’s 12 arrondissement.”

“Institute medico legal? Is this a hospital?”

“It is a... Forensic institute.” Lefèvre falters momentarily. “And a morgue.”

There is a silence. Craig, who was still vaguely staring at the North-African man sitting next to him, sees the man’s eyes dart to his own face before focussing back on the phone the man is holding.

The policewoman continues, ”I will send you the address information in a text message to your phone. And a phone number so you can contact them and let them know when you will arrive.”

“Sure,” Craig clears his throat, “please do that.”

“OK, I will. Excuse me for the bad news. Best wishes to you,” the lady on the other end of the line says, before the call ends.

Craig takes his phone off his ear and in the start screen navigates to his call log. He copies the +33 number he just spoke to and pastes it into his phone’s browser. Google Search’s first hit for the number is the Prefecture Police de Paris official website. Craig’s head jerks upright, seeing nothing in front of him.

After a few seconds, Craig’s thumb taps around his phone and hits the call button on his sister’s number. There is a single ringtone but the call goes to voicemail. Craig smiles when he hears the upbeat tone of Zoe’s recorded voice. She sounds natural. He never managed that on a voicemail greeting.

Craig feels the phone vibrate on his ear. He looks at the text message from the same +33 phone number and sees the contact details for L’institut médico-légal in Paris, France plus

a name; Malika Saqqaf.

Craig copies the message text and pastes it into Google. The search comes up with a Google Maps location followed by a few hits from the institute's official website.

Craig looks up from his phone. The scenery outside passing by at high speed tells him he's about a third of the way to work. His phone shows the time as 08:18 am. That's about right. Craig looks over to where the North-African man sits next to him. To his surprise the man is replaced by a young boy with an oversized kids backpack and legs that wiggle off the front of the seat. Craig hadn't noticed the North-African man leaving the train.

Craig gets up from his seat, slings his bag on his shoulder. The train is busy with commuters and Craig has to excuse himself a few times before pressing past people touching him from all sides. Moving through the mass of bodies is still better than staying in that seat.

The train pulls into another station and this time the mass of bodies jostles him. On his phone, Craig dials his girlfriend's number and puts it to his ear as he hears the overhead sound of the doors-closing alert.

"Hey, baby," Jane's voice greets him in his ear.

"Hi, love."

"Ha ha. You're the second one to call me this morning. My mom rang to say that the dog pulled free on their morning walk again and could I..."

"Jane," Craig interrupts her, "I got a phone call just now."

"Oh, you too, huh? Not about my mom's dog though?" Jane's voice says amusedly.

"No. Not about Woolsey." Craig's hand jerks and he licks his lips. "I got a call from Paris, France. The police there think something happened to Zoe. They want me to go over there. I

think it's real."

A shiver runs down Craig's back. He lets go of the train's hanging strap and loosens his necktie.

"Something happened to Zoe? Like what?" Jane's voice isn't bright anymore.

"They didn't say. They said they found a lady dead. They think it's her."

"O, my Lord..."

Craig sees the apartment buildings flashing by open up to a city park. It is a few beats before Jane speaks again.

"You think it's real?" Jane's voice cracks and she clears her throat. "What are you going to do?"

"I Googled the phone number and it *is* the Paris police that called. The address they gave me also checks out."

The train stops at another station and Craig moves back toward the seat he sat on earlier to let more people onto the train.

Craig lifts his bag strap and puts the bag down on the train floor. He massages his shoulder. "I am going to go."

"You know...", comes Jane's voice from the other side of the line, "they may be wrong. It might not be Zoe."

"Maybe," Craig sighs. "But I don't think they'd call me if..." Craig raises his hand to his face and rubs his eyes. "You're right. I might not be Zoe."

"When are you leaving? Do you want me to go with?" Jane offers.

"As soon as possible," Craig says, becoming aware of his surroundings again and looks for the nearest train exit. He lifts the strap of his bag onto his shoulder and very lightly touches the woman standing next to him to get by. "I'll go on the next available flight. I'll go by myself. I'll let you know if you need to come over."



“I’ll stay by the phone. In case you need help or just... Anything.”

“OK.” The train pulls into the next station. The doors open and Craig moves forward with the other people leaving the train. “I could use a hug.”

“Just as soon as I see you.” Jane’s voice is brighter again.

“Thanks, love,” Craig says, as he looks at the station name sign and the platform clock. “Talk soon.”

“Bye.”

08:43 am. Craig steps on the train home from the platform opposite.

09:07 am. Craig books a 1 pm flight from Gatwick airport.

09:13 am. Craig calls L’institut médico-légal to let them know he’ll arrive near the end of their opening hours.

09:18 am. Craig calls Zoe’s number and gets her voicemail.

09:19 am. Craig calls his work and tells his boss he’s not coming into work for a few days.

09:38 am. Craig throws his passport and some clothes in a weekend bag at home.

09:57 am. Craig steps in a District Line train car.

09:59 am. Craig calls Zoe’s number and gets her voicemail.

10:02 am. Craig sends Kate Fisher a message through Facebook.

10:39 am. Craig steps in the Gatwick Express.

10:41 am. Craig calls Zoe's number and gets her voicemail.

10:42 am. Craig books accommodation in Paris for the night.

11:14 am. Craig arrives at Gatwick Airport.

12:02 pm. Craig sits down at his departure gate.

12:03 pm. Craig calls Zoe's number and gets her voicemail.

12:38 pm. Craig boards the plane.

3:05 pm. Craig lands at Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport.

3:21 pm. Craig calls Zoe's number and gets her voicemail.

4:12 pm. Craig steps on the RER train.

5:01 pm. Craig arrives at the Voie Mazas in Paris.

Craig walks towards the main entrance of the L'institut médico-légal. The building is a large square with two-stories made out of faded red brick. It gives the impression there might be a courtyard atrium through the column-flanked, solid double doors. Once inside, Craig stops at a reception window through which he sees a woman in an office area. The woman walks to the window. She looks to be around ten years older than Craig and is dressed in a flattering business casual look. "Bonjour."

“Bonjour. Parlez-vous anglais s'il vous plait?” asks Craig, not wanting to seem rude by starting in English.

“Yes,” the woman says with a smile, “no problem.”

“My name is Craig Evans. Have an appointment with Ms. Malika Saqqaf.”

“Ah, oui. D'accord. I will bring you to our meeting room and I will call her.”

The woman shows Craig to a pretty room off the side of the main hall. It has white stucco walls with ceiling ornaments, a chandelier and a well-maintained, disused fireplace. There is a grouping of high-backed reading chairs with a salon table as well as a good-sized oak conference table with chairs. Craig sets his bag down at one of the reading chairs and starts circling the room, looking out of each floor-to-ceiling window.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Coffee, please, if you have it,” Craig says, while he looks out over the street at the front of the property.

The woman closes the door behind her.

Just as Craig returns to the chairs, takes a seat and is about to take out his phone, another woman walks in. She is older, closer to retirement age, though not old. She wears an elegant tailored suit with a beautiful, silk green headscarf. She carries a cup of coffee, a dossier folder and a blue cloth zip bag. Her soft hazel eyes smile at Craig, even though her mouth is more politely neutral.

“Hello,” the woman says, as she walks to the salon table and puts the coffee down. “My name is Malika Saqqaf,” she says while extending her hand to Craig. “Thank you for coming to meet us as such short notice.”

“Of course,” Craig says, “forgive my appearance. I didn't expect to be in Paris today.”

Malika gestures for them to sit down. “I am sure you did

not,” she says, with her smile now extending to her mouth.

Craig takes a long draught from his coffee. It is a strong, bitter affair that suits him well right now.

“Since we are here for a reason, I will not delay. I have a few things to show you.” Malika pats the file and bag on her lap. “Can we sit at the table?”

Malika gets up as Craig takes two more swallows to drain the coffee cup. Silently he follows Malika to the table where he takes a seat opposite her, near the window. The bag clinks softly as she puts it down on the table next to the dossier folder.

“I have two photos and some personal possessions to show you. These might be distressing to look at. Tell me when you’re ready to do so.”

Craig takes a big breath and lets it out slowly. His eyelids flutter closed for a brief moment. “Yes. I’m ready,” he says, before he presses his lips together.

“The first photo is of a woman we think is your sister’s friend, Katherine Fisher,” Malika says, while opening the dossier folder. She takes out an A5 matte print image of a woman in her early twenties with dirty blonde hair. Malika lays the photo on the table in front of Craig.

Craig gasps and sits back in his chair. He blinks as he looks at the ceiling. “Yes, that’s her. That’s Kate.”

“Thank you for confirming that. We have a few items of jewellery that we think are your sister’s.”

Malika picks up the blue cloth bag and opens the zipper. She takes out a watch, necklace and ring. The watch is a digital one that looks like the one Zoe has had for years. She bought it at a time when it was very popular and if you press a certain button, one of the top segments shows a dancing figure. The necklace is a non-descript silver chain with a pendant that

Craig doesn't recognise. The ring is a fine gold band that looks just like his mother's wedding ring. Zoe had one made just like it after their parents passed away five years ago. Craig picks up the ring and turns sideways in his chair, his elbows on his knees. He flips the ring over and over in his hand.

There is a knock on the door. The door opens and a male in surgical clothing asks Malika in French to step outside. The corners of Malika's mouth turn down for a second before she responds pleasantly that she will be out in a few minutes. The man nods and closes the door.

Malika opens the dossier folder again. "This is a photo of another lady, who we think is your sister, Zoe Evans."

Still looking at the ring, Craig turns back to the table and places the gold band next to the photo. When he looks at the image it shows the face and shoulders of a young woman with light brown, shoulder length hair. She is positioned as if lying down on a metal sheet. Her skin is grey. Bluish in places. The young woman is dead.

Craig jerks out of his seat and circles to the back of the chair, with his hand on his head. If the eyelids were open, Craig would see his sister's bright, green eyes staring out at him from the picture. His sister Zoe is the dead woman.

Craig lets out a whimper and steps a few paces into the corner of the room. He takes off his suit jacket, which he lets fall to the floor. Craig covers his eyes with a hand and leans his head into the crevice. After, some time Craig hears Malika shift in her chair. Craig spins on his heels away from the corner and sits down on the floor next to his jacket, tears leak out of the corners of his eyes.

Malika breaks the silence. "Is this young woman your sister, Zoe?"

"Yes," Craig says almost inaudibly, almost impossibly.

There is another knock at the door and the man who was there before walks into the room. Malika nods at him silently. To Craig she says, “I will get you some water,” before she leaves the room.

It’s more than 15 minutes before Malika comes back with a cup of water in her hand. Craig is sitting in a reading chair. “Excuse the interruption.”

Craig puts a tissue he took from a box on the shelf over the fireplace in his pocket. “It gave me some time to collect myself,” he says with his eyes still red. Craig takes a sip of water after Malika sits down and hands him the cup. “Can I ask where Zoe was found?”

Malika smiles gently. “I am sorry that we don’t have that information.”

“Can I see her?”

The gently smile now extends to Malika’s eyes. “I am sorry that it is too late for that today. It is past our closing time and our staff has already left. You can come back tomorrow at 11 am. I have already written you down as a visitor for tomorrow.”

Craig nods. “When can I take her home?”

“The investigation is still ongoing so it might be a few days before Zoe’s body is released.”

“I see.” Craig gets up, walks over to his suit jacket and pick it up off the floor, deliberately not looking at the objects on the conference table. “Of course. Thank you.”

Returning to the door, Craig stretches out his hand to shake Malika’s. “I will be back at 11 am then.”

Out the front door, Craig looks at his phone for a minute and then turns right to walk to his accommodation.

06:23 pm. Craig checks into his overnight stay.

06:57 pm. Craig takes a shower to hide his tears in the flow of water.

07:32 pm. Craig falls asleep on the bed.

10:45 pm. Craig leaves in search of late night, unhealthy food.

01:12 am. Craig wanders into his room, smelling of beer.

04:07 am. Craig looks through photos and watches videos of Zoe he has on his phone.

06:23 am. Craig saunters into the city looking forward to coffee and fresh croissants.

At the L'institut médico-légal the receptionist looks deflated as she welcomes Craig and shows him to the same meeting room off the main hall.

Craig is nearly at the reading chairs when Malika Saqqaf enters the room, empty-handed this time, followed by a charismatic man with strands of grey in his black hair. He wears a police uniform.

“Good morning,” says Malika, as they walk towards Craig.

“Good day to you,” he says, as he shakes her hand.

Malika gestures for them to sit down. “This is detective Gustav Dupont. He is working on the investigation into your sister’s death.”

Craig nods to Dupont. “Thank you.”

Malika continues, “He is here for any questions I am sure you have.”

Dupont raises his palms slightly to the sky and grimaces.

“Well, my main question, I think, is for you, Ms. Saqqaf. Can I see Zoe?”

“No,” Dupont says in a firm tone with a voice that is more hoarse than Craig expected given the polished look of the man.

Craig cocks his head in surprise. “No? Why? When *can* I see her?”

“We can’t say for sure,” says the man, his voice just as strained as before.

“Why not?”

Dupont’s mouth twitches. “Because at this time we don’t know where she is.”

“Excuse me?”

Malika breaks her silence. “Your sister’s body went missing sometime before your visit yesterday. Our staff of course has looked everywhere in the building and confirmed with the facilities we work with that your sister’s body isn’t there either.”

Craig’s stomach lurches. “What facilities?”

“Crematoria. Such places,” Malika says.

“Crematorium. So Zoe could be...” Craig swallows a cough down.

“No. We checked.” Malika wrings her hands in her lap. “She has not been transported anywhere.”

Craig pulls on his ear lobe. “But she isn’t here either?”

“No,” Malika confirms.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Dupont agrees. This morning our department has verified everything. Your sister’s body is missing.”

“Is Kate missing too?”

“We can’t comment on that.” Dupont intertwines his fingers as he leans his arms on his knees.

Craig’s eyes widen. “Why not?”



“Because Katherine Fisher is the subject of an ongoing investigation. You are not her kin,” Dupont says, shrugging his shoulders.

There is silence for a minute, as Craig stares at the ornate ceiling and sighs. “Where was Zoe staying in Paris?”

Dupont takes a notepad out of his jacket pocket and flips several pages over. “At the Radisson Blu Le Metropolitan hotel.”

Craig points at the notepad. “Would they know more?”

Dupont scoffs. “Why? You think she walked out of here and checked back in to her hotel?”

“No.” The split-second mental picture of Zoe getting up from a metal slab in her favourite jeans and t-shirt, followed by her walking into a non-descript hotel with a Radisson sign over the entrance gives Craig momentary relief. Reality hits hard. “Maybe someone contacted the hotel to speak to her or see her.”

“Naturally we’ve been in contact with the hotel staff to make sure they let us know if there are any developments or further leads related to your sister’s investigation,” Dupont says in his firm tone again.

“Sure. Of course. Thank you.”

Dupont folds his notepad closed and tucks it away. “We ask that you stay in Paris a few days while we find your sister.”

Craig sighs as he gets to his feet. “I had better go back to my accommodation and extend my stay there.”

## chapter four

*Alex Brantham*

THE COOL NIGHT AIR brushed against her face as Zoe paced along the boulevards, eager to put space between her and everything that had occurred. After what could easily have been hours, she finally managed to bring herself to a halt to take stock of where she was and where she might be going.

If she really had become a ... she couldn't bear even to think the word ... then the one thing that she knew was that she had to be off the street by daybreak. Whenever the hell that was. She fished out her phone and Googled: "Sunrise calendar Paris". Up popped a page full of graphs and numbers. WTF?

Daylight today would start at 07:10. OK, clear enough. But what was all this shit about Twilight? Did that count? And if it did, which one – Astronomical, Nautical or Civil? It felt like the sort of nerdish nonsense that the boys in the office would debate for an entire evening in the pub, but for her, now, it could literally be a matter of life and death.

Assuming she really were alive.

Her steps echoed along the empty streets, the sound of her

heels bouncing back at her from the forbidding stone facades.

A dog trotted out from a side alley, stopped and turned to face her. It stood, gazing straight at her, then bared its teeth and snarled, lowering its hind legs as if preparing to pounce. Zoe halted, a couple of metres in front, and stared back, while at the same time grasping the backpack on her shoulder in case she needed a shield.

The animal twitched and eased backwards, a dribble of saliva appearing in the corner of its mouth. The eyes were green, bright, and unblinking.

Something inside Zoe took over. She bared her own teeth and hissed at the mutt, crouching lower and moving forwards. It felt like a creature inside her had taken over the controls and she was merely a spectator.

The dog broke its stare, yelped, turned, and ran, disappearing into the Parisian shadows.

Zoe straightened up and released the grip on her pack. Was this who she now was - a monster of the night?

She reached for her phone again. It was perilously low on battery but was at least able to tell her the time; four thirty. She had at most two and a half hours to get herself to a place of safety for the coming day.

But where would be safe? Out here in the outer reaches of the city, she might expect to find a small pension - but would they answer their door at this time of night? Besides, she needed the anonymity of a hotel, not somewhere where the owner could wander in at any time during the day. Definitely a tourist hotel, where they'd be used to people turning up at all hours, from different time zones, and she'd be able to hide away.

That meant getting into the centre. A glance at the map on her phone confirmed the direction. Might she take a taxi? She

pictured herself climbing into the back of the cab, and the driver looking in his mirror at her, as they always do. What would he see? How would he react? No, too risky, she'd have to walk.

After an hour or so, the illuminated scaffold finger of the Eiffel Tower began to appear from time to time in the gaps between the buildings. She was at least heading in the right direction, and the nature of the terrain changed as she went: less suburban, and more city centre, with occasional parades of shops.

As she passed by a clothes store, she couldn't help herself - she had to look. In front of her, a line of dummies, their heads and arms tilted at improbable angles, as if having an earnest conversation with each other, all encased in expensive dresses and cheap jewellery.

In the glass she saw the houses on the other side of the street behind her, and a lamp post near where she stood.

But she still wasn't there.

From nowhere, the reflection of a male figure appeared in the window and stopped next to her, gazing at the dummies. Zoe glanced to her left: yes, an actual man, tall with short curly hair, wearing a light jacket for protection against the night chill.

"Spooky, isn't it?" he said. "I'm guessing you're new to this? Still a bit of a novelty?"

Zoe had no idea how to answer this, and just looked at him, puzzled.

"This whole no-reflection thing, I mean," he said. "You've got to admit, it is a bit weird."

She looked back in the window. "But I can see you," she said.

"Of course you can. I'm not ... like you."

"What do you want? And how did you know to speak English?"

He looked her, up and down. "Well, the clothes are rather a giveaway. And I don't want anything. Except to help, perhaps. And here's the first bit of that: you really, really want to avoid situations like this - the window, I mean. The next person that sees you're not there might not be as understanding as me."

Zoe nodded and moved away from the shop, continuing her direction of travel towards the city centre. "Who are you? Where are you from?"

He walked alongside, tracking her movements. "I'm Billy, pleased to meet you. And I'm from Birmingham."

That figured. The characteristic midlands whine would have got right up her nose if she'd been at home in London, but here, now, it felt comfortably familiar.

"And what are you doing here, Billy from Birmingham?"

"Oh, merely another creature of the night, like you. Only in my case it's because I'm a musician, and my shifts aren't what you'd call sociable. And I've learned that you can meet some interesting ... people ... on the streets at night."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You trust ME? I think I'm more the one at risk in this conversation, don't you?"

Zoe wasn't too sure about that, not yet, but she remembered her inner response to the dog earlier and considered that he might be right. Then again, who was he and what were his motives?

Billy continued, "So, where are you headed, anyway? You'll be looking for somewhere to stay during the day, I guess."

"I thought I'd find a hotel and hole up for a few days while I work things out."

He shook his head. "Very risky. You can never be sure

when the cleaner will come into your room. And, besides, the curtains are never quite up to the job, are they?"

"So what do you suggest?"

"I have a place near here. You can stay until you work out what you want to do next."

Zoe frowned. "And what's in it for you?"

He shrugged. "The satisfaction of helping someone in need? If it will make you feel better, you can pay me - nothing exorbitant, just what you'd pay a hotel. Two hundred Euro a night, perhaps? It would have to be cash, obviously."

"What kind of place are we talking about?"

"I rent an apartment; it has its own cellar. No daylight down there. Perfectly safe for you." He smiled. "It's down this road here, on the left."

Billy indicated a small side street. It was narrow and dark and Zoe didn't like the look of it one little bit, but felt as if she was beginning to run out of options. And was the sky starting to lighten in the East?

"Show me," she said. "I'll let you know when I see it."

"Fair enough. This way."

He walked steadily on, around the corner and into the side road. Zoe stayed with him, keeping rather more distance than she might normally. Perhaps that suited them both.

"Got any other tips for me? Besides not standing in front of windows, that is?"

Billy smiled. "Sure. Don't believe everything you read on the internet, for starters. I mean, I know that's true generally, but in your case - doubly so. Most what you read is made-up shit, usually with a strong garnish of Hollywood fantasy laid on top."

"But sunrise is a big thing, right? And what about twilight? I got horribly confused when I tried to look that up."

"Yes, sunrise is a serious problem for you. But don't worry about twilight - that only means the sun is just below the horizon. Think of it as your ten minute warning."

Zoe looked to the East again. Yes, the sky was definitely less dark in that direction.

"You're very knowledgeable. Do you meet many ... people like me?"

"A few." He grinned, showing his less-than-perfect teeth. "There seem to be quite a lot of you recently, especially around here. I help if I can. You know, one outsider helping another."

"In what way are you an outsider?"

"You ever hear of anyone being friends with a bass guitarist?"

Zoe couldn't think of an answer to that, but it didn't matter because Billy had come to a halt next to an opening in the line of buildings.

"In here," he said.

Zoe peered into the gloom. Beyond the entrance there was a small courtyard, with three or four floors reaching up, all around. She followed him in, as he approached a heavy wooden door at the back of the yard.

Billy pulled a key from his pocket, opened the door, and stood back.

"After you," said Zoe.

"As you wish." He went in and stood to one side. Zoe stepped gingerly through the doorway. A single candle, almost burned out, flickered on a sideboard, providing the only illumination in a dark and dingy hallway with a couple of doors and a flight of stairs reaching up into the gloom. The door slammed shut behind her, with an additional click that might have been the lock being turned.

"This way," said Billy, moving towards one of the doors. This was shorter than the others, and Zoe couldn't help noticing the heavy bolt mounted on the outside. The door swung open, revealing a set of steps leading downwards. Inside, a naked flame flickered at the head of a crude torch fastened to the wall. A smell of burning, pain and fear swept across the narrow space and Zoe had seen enough.

"Thanks for the offer, but I think I'll pass..." she said, moving back towards the door to the courtyard outside. It was, as she half expected, locked. She spun round to face Billy, who now had the burning torch in his hand.

"Do you know what this flame will do to you, bitch?" He inched towards her, waving the torch slowly from side to side. "I'll give you a clue. It's much the same as sunlight, only it takes longer and hurts a lot more. So stop messing me about and get down into that cellar."

Zoe reached for her backpack and eased it off one shoulder. "I'll pay you your money," she said. "You can have five nights' worth, a thousand Euro. Just let me go."

"A thousand! That's small change compared with what I can get for you. Besides, whatever you've got in that bag is mine anyway, just my little bonus, you might say. Get down there." He gestured with the torch in the direction of the cellar door.

"Or what? You'll burn me? You won't get paid then, will you?" Zoe desperately scanned the space for a weapon but found none.

"Don't try to negotiate with me, you monster. I'm the one in charge here. Now move, or burn." Billy swished closer with the torch, and Zoe felt an excruciating shot of pain as the flame passed by her face.

As the torch passed to her left, Zoe swung her backpack



around with all her strength from the right. The pack smashed into the torch and sent it flying to the ground, where it landed on a pile of old newspapers in the corner.

Just for an instant Billy froze, his face contorted in fear and rage.

It was enough for Zoe, with or without the help of any inner demon, to swing a fist and knock him sideways, where his head crashed into the edge of the sideboard.

Behind her, the torch had set light to the rubbish on the floor, flames gently flickering and lighting up the grisly scene. Billy stirred; she had no time to waste. Zoe patted down his pockets until she found the key, and then turned for the exit.

Once outside in the courtyard she looked back. Flames were licking around the inside of Billy's lair, but there was no other sign of movement.

Zoe ran, and ran. At last she reached the main road, the smell of smoke left behind her, and she could resume her path towards the city centre.

By the time she found her destination the sky was almost fully light. The first few hotels she came to showed no signs of life and she didn't have time to wait to summon an unwilling night porter.

On the dot of seven o'clock she arrived at what was surely her last hope. A pretty little tourist hotel in the side streets off the Place de la Madeleine, the Hotel de l'Arcade was exactly the sort of place she might have chosen in more conventional circumstances.

Right now, all she cared about was that they had a room, and that it had curtains that worked. Five minutes later, "Daniela Jones", having paid a hefty deposit in cash for the crime of not wanting to use a credit card that would allow the authorities to trace her, was inside the room, pausing only to

thrust the "Do Not Disturb" sign onto the outside handle as she entered.

She rushed to the windows and closed the curtains, just as the sky started to change colour once again. As soon as she released them, they sprang open again at the top, opening up a crack that could let in the deadly rays. With one last shove, she pushed them back together and prayed that, this time, they would hold.

They did.

Zoe collapsed on the bed. Too tired to sleep or cry, she curled up and waited for the day to pass.

## chapter five

*Ron Ward*

THE HAND JUST LAY there waiting. A mechanical pencil falls to the floor. The rhythm of the writing implement bouncing on the stone floor arouses her brain. The waiting hand is her hand. "What am I waiting for?" In her other hand, she has a closed pill bottle. "I must have a headache," she thinks.

Asserting her will Zoe opens her right hand letting the pill bottle fall. The feeling is exhilarating. The small bottle rolls toward the edge of the table. Zoe rubs the wood enjoying the sensation of quality the table exudes. She can feel the vibration of the bottle rolling away. The bottle slows near the edge of the table, briefly stops then begins to roll back. Zoe's hand is still, just waiting there.

A wave of unease sweeps over Zoe. It feels like this is an again situation. Again she has forgotten something. Again she is sitting still, so very still. Again the air fails to fill her lungs. Her will has failed her, now she must find a new will, a new reason to be. Deep in her guts, a spark. Her mind wanders. There in the deep dark, she nurses the spark until a flame takes hold. The daydream fades but her body tingles and there

in the center, a new will.

Zoe consciously forces her lungs full of air. So thirsty. Titters, snippets of noise, pain, all these and a litany of other recent sensations snap into place and Zoe is here. She raises both hands. With a little growl, she forces her fingers to run through her hair. Feeling strong as she surveys Paris at night. The city gleams with possibility.

Annoyed that the pill bottle does not fall all the way off the table she grabs it, stands, and throws the bottle over the balcony. She is delighted with the sensation of being a little naughty. The sound of the bottle hitting the wall across the street both startles and pleases her. "I need sleep," she says to the bottle of sleeping pills as it bounces off an awning, nearly making it back to her side of the street. "I am so thirsty!" Zoe screams into the haze of Parisian spring.

Zoe stood looking at the street. Nothing moved. The lights on in the street show nothing of note. She is rigid. Her back is screaming in pain. No amount of wanting can make her limbs move. Legs and arms are locked in rigor. For a moment she flashes back on the scene at the morgue. Zoe sees her face, Kate's face. A frail wail wafts up and out of her. Sensing a chance Zoe pushes forcing the wail to grow into moan, and on into a screech.

The echo of her release has less force than she had hoped it would, but what did she expect from a yell. One thing was clear screaming helped. Her body was sore. She was in the Hôtel De l'Arcade. Zoe could not eat, the fruit basket offered her only foul smells. She could not drink, not even Chablis. Chablis had never failed her but tonight even the shape of the bottle offended her. Sleep, no, no sleep, the desk, and table were littered with unfinished drawings on hotel note pads. None very good. No memory of creating them. Yet details of

events from earlier in her night were again clear. Something was very wrong in her body. "I need to drink... something."

Zoe woke in the bathtub still wearing all her clothes. She was shivering in the cooled water. The clammy sleeves on her t-shirt stuck to her arms as she sat up. Her back still hurt. Without hesitation, she screamed. Screw the neighbours, screw the manager, screw the cops who were coming to drag her out of the hotel for causing such a ruckus. She very badly needed to pee.

Sitting in the water Zoe thought about her situation. Her body could not support her brain. It kept shutting down. Over and over tonight she had 'woken' to find herself in stasis. "You need to eat," there was no denying that, hunger swelled. "you need to drink," and here she sat in gallons of water.

"Drink it!" She felt like the command came from outside her. "Drink, drink, drink." But the water was not the liquid her mind conjured. A river of blood flowed out of her body. It overflowed the tub crashing into the bathroom door forcing it open. Then out the door, she floats on the river, exultant in the power of the flow. The blood river gained strength, crashing over the balcony and into the blood-soaked street. Zoe is ecstatic about the vision. The river of blood cajoles her to sink beneath. While the warmth of the flow is as enticing as an old quilt.

"Try one more time before you call the people from the asylum." Zoe took another deep breath, cupped her hands, allowed the tepid water to fill her vessel. Without enthusiasm, she raised the water. It smelled of shit, a putrid stew of chemical scents, and a modicum of minerals. Ignoring the evidence of her own senses she tipped the liquid into her mouth.

The taste is revolting. All along her oesophagus erupts into

a trail of fire. The water hit her guts with a towering thud. The sound of boiling thunders in her ears as the water reacts to the new chemicals in her suddenly very tortured body. A stream of vomit gathers on the wall of the shower. The force and direction of her ejaculation spreading the sludge until a crystal vase of both cream and yellow daffodils is forced off the little rack above the towels.

Zoe kneels in the cool water breathing. Heaving breaths enflame the wound caused by the hotel water. Physically spent she can only think of one thing "So thirsty."

There is a knock at the door. "Not my bathroom door"," she thought, "There is someone in the hallway. "She looks at the broken vase, "maybe someone is particularly fond of daffodils.

"Give me a minute," Zoe said.

"I just need to make sure you are doing well. Miss?" The question about her last name hung in the air.

"I think someone spiked my drink." I don't feel too well.

"Shall I call you an ambulance? Can you make it to the door on your own?" The hotel clerk said.

"I vomited, sorry for my bluntness."

"In situations like these, I prefer bluntness, always best to get right to the point."

"Yes, well on that advice, what I know for sure is that I am kneeling, on all fours, in a bathtub, in a hotel many miles from the safety of my own bed. In that bathtub is a little water and everything I have eaten since Sunday last."

"About the paramedics miss?"

"Honestly, I don't think they have what I need most. It is not long till morning now, is it?" Zoe asked.

"Not eminent if that is your question."

"Ahh," it took her a moment to concoct a plan. "how

about you telling me your name. A young man knocking on a girl's door usual offers his name."

"Unless I miss my guess as to your profession, I doubt you have much experience with young men knocking on your door without having been invited. Therefore it follows that you have little experience with what is usual in these situations. Clive, my name, Clive."

"Honestly Clive, what I need most is to get out of this tub with floating vomit. I think that did the trick. It must have been something I ate. Why don't you go tell whoever complained that you have the situation in hand? I will make myself presentable and you can come back in a few minutes and check up on me." Zoe was getting a warm feeling about the young man sight unseen.

Clive walked up to the door took a deep breath and knocked. The guests both above and below had complained about the noise. "Sounds like a rock band is tearing the place up." From above and from below "I think someone just got murdered right above me." Clive had in his three years at the hotel had dealt with one murder. It was a quiet and somber affair. Clive had high hopes this morning would turn out as a one-nighter. She had a soothing voice, plus she sounded hot.

"Clive is that you Clive." She delivered the line with a false aristocratic accent. Clive hated that.

"I unlocked the door, come in and find out for yourself," Zoe said.

Clive tried the latch and yes, unlocked, he relished the anticipation, what if she is a hound, and angel, a thief. With as much pomp as he could muster he opened the door. "Will madame be needing anything further this evening." Clive got the accent spot on.

"Could we go for a short walk, Clive? I realize you must

have duties here at the hotel. I simply feel like the walking I have been able to do in the room is helping clear my head. I don't want to wake anyone up again. What do you think?"

Against his better judgment, Clive suddenly felt as if walking with this mysterious creature was exactly the thing he needed to do most. "I can ask Peter to finish my shift at the desk. As far as duties go I feel like my duty is to my patrons."

"Wait there then Clive. I just have to tie my shoe."

The door opened the bathroom door and Zoe looked up into Clive's eyes. She could see that he was a good sort. Clive for his part could not take his eyes off her sparkling green eyes. They were the most startling shade, as deep and emotive as a German forest.

"Where do you want to go?" Clive asked.

"Towards the Seine, unless you have a better destination."

"Towards the Seine is perfect. We can go for a walk, you can sober up, then the sun will come up and we can find a cafe for breakfast." Clive's apartment was on the way to the Seine. This was working out to be a night he could tell stories about.

"Is it far?"

"I don't know what far means to you but it is going to be a bit of a walk to get to the river. This time of night there is not much in the way of public transportation available either. Do you still want to go." Clive asked.

Zoe did not want to go, she needed to go. During her shower, the river of blood vision repeated. Always the dream ended in her feeling so perfect so complete. Her body moaned at every motion. Weakness washed over in waves. "We will go to this guy's apartment and I can drink him." The finality of her resolve frightened her.

Zoe touched the tip of her overgrown canine with a finger. The spot of blood that welled up glistened in the hotel's light.



Glowing from within the blood sang to her cells. The taste of the drop on her tongue caused a shudder to radiate even to the tips of her hair.

"Yes, I do. You must promise to tell me when the sun is about to rise. I need to be back in case Dad calls."

"I have always gotten along great with daddie's girls."

"This is not a date, it is a walk. You will need to keep that dong on a leash naughty boy."

"I can keep him in the crate if that is how you want it. I have to tell you though he is pretty well trained. If we get the chance I would like to show you a couple of tricks he has learned."

"It is a long walk, I am going to be tired, be nice and I will give you an exclusive once time only chance, to show me Paris like a lover, tonight, or er, tomorrow night."

"How about we call this right now last night. I will come by tonight and treat you right. We better get going if you have to be back at the crack of dawn."

Zoe's gums hurt. As they walked her canine teeth poked into her lower lip. Back at the hotel, she had tried to see if they were really growing but of course, the mirror was defective. She put a finger up to the tooth. Sliding her finger up and down the length, twenty maybe twenty-five millimeters long. Sharp too, three of her own finger sported new scars.

The city smelled differently. Zoe saw a small alcove on the side of a building she was unfamiliar with. Not so different than most of the other buildings in that respect. The need to drink having found its source gave her a short respite. Now that she had found a place it came back with a vengeance. Zoe stumbled under the pain. It felt like her brain was being eaten by bees.

Clive put his arm under hers to steady her, and cop a feel,

bastard. "You going to be alright?"

"Over there help me get over there." Zoe pointed toward the alcove. She leaned against him giving him another brush with her boob. She felt his strength lift when his knuckle brushed her tit. For the hundredth time, she thanked the great mother for allowing her to travel through life without a brain-sucking appendage attached to her crotch.

"Wha, what the hell." Clive is backing toward the street.

"What is wrong Clive?"

"Your tooth, your teeth, are you a vampire?"

"I guess, I am. I am not sure why, or how. I am on vacation." The gravity of Clive's question passed right over her head. Instead, his question focused all of her memories of the evening. Given the broken mirrors, given the illness, the lapses of memory. The mother-fucking rage propelling her forward, this turd thinks he can, that it is possible, to defy my will.

Clive wanted to run.

Zoe caught him.

Clive started to scream. "Vampire, vampire"

"Lucky bastard," came the reply from an alcove further up the street.

Clive started swinging, Zoe blocked his punches with quick pushes against his wrists. The thirst drove her, enveloped her. She caught him over the neck and under an arm. They wallowed back to the alcove looking like contorted siamese twins.

"How did you get so strong, I thought you were sick."

"I am not that strong."

"I am not a weakling my dear and I could not get away from you."

"Maybe you are just not as strong as you think."

"I thought you were sick!"

"I think I am better now."

"What does that mean?"

Zoe ducked under his arm. Clive pulled back. She caught a tooth in his neck skin. The small stream of blood enflamed her. The tear on his neck from her badly aimed bite seeped crimson.

Zoe pushed up between arm and neck knowing exactly where to plunge. Sip, sip, satisfying sip, Zoe drank Clive and he shivered in delight.

A rooster crowed. In the east the barest hint of light. Zoe ran, filled with terror. Clive stayed where he was, enraptured and revolted by his lack of moral fiber.

Self-preservation broke through the fear. From where she stood she could see her hotel. Zoe could also see the blood on her hands and had to imagine her face looked a fright as well. Zoe slid into a shadow, took off her t-shirt and wiped her hands and face.

Looking at the hotel she noticed a side door on her side of the building. She turned the shirt inside-out and sauntered towards the hotel. Inside fear grew with each step. Berating herself she broke into a run. Fear of the light more potent than her fear of discovery.

## chapter six

*Conrad Gempf*

ZOE STIRRED AND OPENED her eyes. The tasteful ornate furniture of her hotel room made her smile, for a second delighted to be in Paris, city of springtime and fashion — *real* fashion — and the Eiffel Tower and music and...

The stalker guy. The attack. She sat up with a start.

“Oh, hell. Kate.”

Kate’s dead. Her memory was blurred, but not blurred enough. Could it be true? There was no doubt it was all true, it all happened.

Worse: it was still happening. Giving in to her thirst — becoming an attacker herself — would it happen again?

No. No! She tried to tell herself that it was a one-off, an unfortunate thing, not something she herself did, but a thing that happened *to her*. It will wear off, she almost said aloud. She was sick... *is* sick... so she can’t help what happened, what she did. But it will wear off. Surely it will wear off. It *has to*. It will go away, like a bad cold or like whimsical appetite cravings women get when they’re pregnant. She remembered her doctor saying to her after that broken arm years ago, “You’re

still young, your body will heal and adjust. A year from now, it will be as though the accident never happened.”

She got out of bed, started toward the bathroom to brush her teeth.

Stopped.

There would be a mirror in that little room. She didn’t want to see a mirror just now. She would brush her teeth later. That coppery tang in her mouth would have to wait .... Wait, what? Coppery?

“Oh, hell!” She recognised the taste.

She wished it was unpleasant, she wanted it to be repugnant. It might be easier not to think about it at all.

She looked at the clock. It was early ... 5:45. Something stopped her from drawing open the heavy hotel curtains to greet the morning. Nothing felt right. None of her behaviours seemed natural to her anymore. Behind the curtains, traffic noises, honking... That twilight she sensed but could not see... it was *sun~~set~~*, not dawn; it was 5:45 in the evening, not 5:45 a.m. It would be dark soon. No wonder she was disoriented. The trauma of the attack, that’s all. Just a reaction, just a phase. What is it Monica in Accounts always says? “Right as rain in the morning!” Zoe knew it wouldn’t be so, but said it anyway. She shook her head against negative thoughts and tried to get on her morning routine (even though it was not morning).

She opened her suitcase and looked for something to wear. Even in this muted light, her bargain clothes from Manho looked more bright and garish than she’d remembered them. Had something happened to her eyesight? Even her favourite jeans and Korean language t-shirt seemed too ... just too.... She wanted something dark, something black... She found her little black dress (decidedly *not* one of her company’s!), put it on,

instinctively put on her sunglasses too.

Who could she call and talk about this with? Everyone would say she was over-reacting, fantasising. She couldn't tell anyone everything, obviously. Except maybe a professional. The NHS back home had hot lines if you think you're poisoned or if you think you might be having a heart attack. Was there Werewolf-Vampire Help Line? She imagined a voice answering cheerily, "Hellooo; you've reached the Paraphysiology Department. How can I help?"

The better way was there in the suitcase, next to her heels. Since joining the online retail world, she started carrying her small light laptop everywhere, even on a weekend jaunt to Paris. She remembered that older guy (Evan? Ivan?) she'd once brought home, who thought *he* was having a heart attack, trying not to get anxious, googling "false heart attack symptoms." That was a better way. When in doubt, google it.

There was a chair and a dressing table in the room, and a plug in easy reach. She opened it up, entered the password from the "Hotel de l'Arcade" booklet on the table, and fired up the search engine.

<Am I a vampire?> she typed almost without conscious thought. Her search engine dutifully returned a scrolling list of websites to try.

The first site she went to was entitled, promisingly, "Vampires are Real: Scientists reveal the truth," but the only scientist on offer, the author, turned out to be, upon investigation, a 72-year-old meteorologist, retired from predicting the weather and now happily running two websites, the other being "Martians are Real: Scientists reveal the truth."

The next site sported a black and white photo of Bela Lugosi, with his swirling black cape. It startled her that he looked attractive, sexy even — suave and powerful. The text

talked about various facets of what the author clearly considered nothing more than an interesting collection of folk tales and myths. But the article was well-written and engaging, and it brought back to Zoe some of the details she knew she'd gleaned as a girl from hastily-consumed books, movies and tv shows.

Some of the web article was obviously not true — she'd slept quite soundly in an ordinary bed, not requiring a coffin, and did not find the idea of lying in a coffin at all relaxing or appealing. Having said that, she felt a chill realising she had slept while it was light and woken up as it was turning dark. As if to accentuate the time, she heard the door of another room in the hotel corridor slam, and voices calling to one another to “come on” — a group of people ready to start a night out in Paris. Her whole body stiffened at the sound of the voices, head turned involuntarily in their direction, senses sharpened keen as a predator. Zoe pretended to herself not to feel any pang of hunger.

She read that vampires are sometimes thought to be shape-shifters, voluntarily, unlike werewolves. There was no accompanying film photo, but she thought she remembered Lugosi being able to turn into a bat for convenience of travel and escape. She tried hard not to think about it, not to try it. What was true and what was fiction? She was afraid of the possibilities, but she couldn't stop reading.

She read about things that bring fear or pain to vampires, garlic, crosses, silver, wooden stakes through the heart, beheadings, and especially deadly sunlight. She wondered if it might indeed be possible to test these things.

The drapes were still closed, but she knew it was dark outside. Sunlight would not be a great thing to test anyway. If this article was right, it would kill her, burn her up instantly.

Better would be garlic — room service? — or silver.

In her jewellery box at home she had a small cross necklace and some chains and maybe a bracelet of silver, or at least silver-plated. But she hadn't brought any. The dining room of the hotel might be empty by now, she could perhaps sneak in there, but was so-called "silverware" really made out of silver anymore? She somehow doubted it.

Steeling herself against unpleasantness, in to the search engine she typed "churches, crosses" and rested her fingers lightly on the keys to stab to close the window. But the images that came up did not bother her much at all, whether simply sanded wooden crosses, or elaborate Roman Catholic crucifixes, the Lord Jesus with his arms spread wide either involuntarily or supremely voluntarily open in welcoming embrace and then fixed into that position. She did not seem to be adversely affected by crosses. Maybe she wasn't a vampire after all?

She tried to remember the taste and smell of garlic, but couldn't quite.

Back to the search engine for "vampire, temporary." The results were disheartening. Those two words did not seem to appear together in anything other than advertisements for the sale of "temporary vampire tattoos" or for penalties in video games.

Searching again for symptoms, the next website said that a vampire will retain whatever characteristics they had when they became a vampire: "if they cut their hair, it will regrow to exactly it's base value." This site also mentioned the lack of image in mirrors, and not showing up in photographs. Zoe clenched her teeth and got up and walked over to the bathroom with its mirrors. Closer to the door of her room she could again hear voices. These were different people — stupid,



laughing people from the sound of them, she found herself thinking. Life was a game to them, no cares in their superficial world. She again stiffened, and felt a desire to yank the door open and surprise them, scaring them would be very satisfying, wouldn't it? She could then grab the weakest one, the slowest one and...

She shook her head again, entered the bathroom and jumped backwards out of it gasping and wanting to cry.

Sitting back down, she noted that the hotel brochure, in English as well as French, did boast the availability of room service, and she felt hungry now. She wondered if there would be something like garlic mushrooms on the menu to test. There were not. It made sense; they would stink up the whole room for hours.

"The steak please. Medium rare ... no, rare, very rare," she said into the phone. When offered red wine, she agreed gladly. Thirty minutes, she was told.

She returned her attention to the search engine. Somewhere out there, there *had to be* a site by someone who was more than a film fan, someone who actually knew what they were talking about. She needed help, not merely the mutterings of morbidly fascinated imbeciles.

Her attacker! He must have bit her and caused all this. It was awful and she hated him and wanted to hurt him, but at the same time, he was the one person who she could be sure really knew about the condition she was in. She tried to remember anything she could about him... tried to think of some way of finding him again. She struck a blank except for the idea of going out into the night and hanging around again at the site of her attack. No. Probably not him. But she would have to find *someone* she could trust — someone who knew and understood and could coach her. She'd go out later. Or

tomorrow. For now, she'd ordered steak and it would be here soon.

A site called "Confessions of a Vampire" started promisingly, but then was clearly fiction, but entertaining and she was engrossed enough that a sudden sharp rap on the door startled her, and she found herself standing, facing the door before her brain had processed the door knocking. She froze.

"Room Service," came a call with another knock.

"Come in," said Zoe more sweetly than she intended to, "Please... come in."

A young man in a white jacket, wearing black trousers, creases sharp as blades, came into the room wheeling in a table with a white tablecloth. Atop this table was a shiny chromium plate cover/dome, and next to that a large wine goblet, half-filled with sensuously dark red liquid that sloshed around like tiny stormy ocean waves as the table moved across the room.

Zoe shifted position slightly, so that the chair she'd been sitting on was no longer between her and the young man. She watched him carefully, mentally measuring his stride, assessing the muscles in his arm and chest beneath his clothes, watched his head, his Adam's apple, the skin of his neck and the veins that throbbed beneath.

Setting the table in position, he turned to her and started to speak.

But he checked himself and no words came out. He looked first at her sunglasses, then his eyes took in her shape, the short black dress, the bare skin of her legs and her bare feet. By the time his eyes returned to the sunglasses, she had silently swept them off her face to the soft carpet that her toes clenched and grabbed underfoot.

And again, he could only *attempt* to speak, the merest

stutter of French, his eyes now lost, plummeting into the piercing vacuum of Zoe's bottomless, soulless, green eyes.

She moved towards him across the room on the balls of her feet, silently, and ever so slowly. At first.

And Zoe ate and drank, and was very satisfied. Then she slept soundly, determined that tomorrow, she would find someone who understood — an advisor, a mentor. Somehow.

## chapter seven

Amy E Lilly

ZOE OPENED THE NIGHTSTAND next to the bed. A small phonebook nestled underneath the requisite Gideon Bible. How did they manage to infiltrate every high-end hotel and seedy flophouse around the world?

“Damn it!” Zoe said. “If I touch that I’m going to burst into flames. Or is that demons? I could call down to the front desk to get a night porter. *Excuse me, tasty morsel of a human, could you please move the Bible so I don’t burst into flames because I think I’m a bloodsucking vampire?*”

Zoe gave a snort of laughter at the imagined reaction she would receive. She looked around the room and found a pen and pad of paper on the small credenza in the corner. She used the pen to slide the potentially dangerous object off the phonebook. She snatched the phonebook from the drawer and slammed it shut.

Flipping to the center yellow pages, she found nothing under *D*. She thumbed through the pages until she found the heading for private investigators.

“Hmm...Dick Daniels, private investigator...specializes

in divorce and child custody...no..." Zoe read quickly through several advertisements. Most of the listings were for investigators who focused on cheating spouses with office hours ending at five.

She was on the third page when she found him. *Louis Raymond, Private Detective. French, English, and Mandarin. Open until nine p.m.* It listed an address on the Rue Favart and a phone number but no other details. It didn't matter. She needed help and she needed it now. Zoe slammed the book shut. It was eight o'clock, and the moon was already up. Raymond's office was only a few blocks away.

On the street, Zoe had a moment of panic. There were people everywhere she looked. She could hear each passerby's heartbeat and smell the blood coursing through their veins. A greasy-faced man with a belly paunch hanging over his belt bumped into her and she could smell the taint of disease. His heart was struggling. She looked at his face and knew he would die within a week.

*I could help him out, she thought. Kill him now and save his family the pain of watching him clutch his chest and collapse in front of them.*

Zoe gasped as the thought flitted through her mind. Where the hell did that come from?

"Sorry," the man mumbled. He looked at Zoe. "Are you okay?"

Zoe's mouth moved but couldn't form words. The pulse throbbing in his neck was so tempting. She could take a little taste-

"Excuse me!" Pushing him out of her way, she stumbled down the street.

A few minutes later she found herself standing in front of a three-story brick building that had seen better days.

Weeds struggled between the cracks in the sidewalk and beer bottles littered the steps leading to the entrance. She picked her way through some broken glass. Once inside, she looked at the listings of the tenants. Louis Raymond was on the first floor.

She wandered past the ancient elevator and saw there was an “Out of Order” sign written in marker and taped to the door.

*I wonder if I can fly up the stairs. Or maybe I can turn into a bat. That would be kind of cool except for the whole eating bugs and looking like a bat thing.* She squeezed her eyes shut and imagined herself flying. She opened them to discover she was still standing in the seedy lobby, a cockroach’s antenna waving as it watched her from its dark corner.

“What are you looking at?” she snarled. “I’ll eat you for snack.”

The cockroach scurried through a crack in the wall, and Zoe walked down the hallway to find Raymond’s office before she actually did eat the bug.

There were several doors off the hallway. One was clearly a bathroom. She could smell the urinal cake through the closed door. Down the dark hallway was a door with peeling gold letters, *Louis Raymond, Private Detective*. She opened it and found an empty reception area.

Zoe glanced around. A layer of dust covered the telephone and blotter. A few battered metal filing cabinets resided in the far corner. Two stained and tattered cloth chairs occupied the front wall.

“Hello? Is anyone here?”

A faint rustle came from the closed door to the left of the reception desk. “Hang on. I’ll be right with you. I just need a moment.”

Zoe could hear the sound of furniture being moved. Two minutes later, the door opened. A tall, ebony-colored man with muscles that would put an Olympic wrestler to shame stepped out. He was tucking in a collared shirt that could benefit from a washing and an iron.

“Sorry. I was taking a kip. Big case keeping me up all hours. Louis Raymond, but I go by Raymond.” Zoe’s small hand was enveloped in his large paw. “Whoa! Your hand’s like an icicle. Can I get you a cup of tea? Water?”

“Thank you, no,” Zoe said. As she stood there, she realized this was a bad idea. How was this man going to help her? Maybe she should just go back to London. “This was a mistake. Have a good evening.”

“Wait,” Raymond put out a hand to stop her. “Come have a seat. Clearly, you came here for a reason. Maybe I can help you, but maybe I can’t. Either way, you can tell me what’s troubling you and we’ll go from there. First consultation is free.”

Zoe hesitated then decided what the hell. If he called the nearest hospital to have her institutionalized after she told him her dilemma, well...she could just drink his blood and be done with it. No harm. No foul. She followed him into his office.

She sat down on one of the three scarred wooden chairs by the desk and looked around. His desk was stacked with files that threatened to topple at the slightest sneeze. An ancient desktop computer occupied one side of the desk with a keyboard whose letters had faded from time and use. Several dirty cups littered the top of his desk. She saw an electric kettle next to a hot plate on a small table in the corner. A sorry looking gray couch was in the corner and Zoe saw a blanket crumpled up on one end.

“Sorry about the mess. I really should get a secretary or

something.” He shrugged. “How can I help you, Miss-?”

“Zoe Evans. Just call me Zoe. You aren’t French.” Zoe stated the obvious.

“Canadian. I moved here from Vancouver about three years ago. Set up shop here and haven’t looked back. The weather and food are much better in Paris, but I do miss the beer and hockey.” He smiled and waited for her to speak.

Zoe shifted in her seat. “I’m a vampire,” she blurted.

Raymond sat back. “Okay. Not what I was expecting, but I can work with it. When you say vampire, are you speaking metaphorically or literally? My ex-girlfriend could suck the life out of me every time she was on her period, but she was definitely a human.”

“I thought I could get someone to help me out of the mess I’m in, but there’s nothing you can do. I’m sorry I wasted your time.” Zoe stood up.

“Sit back down, Zoe. Please. Tell me why you think you’re a vampire.”

Zoe recounted the events leading up to her waking up in the morgue. As she recalled seeing Kate’s lifeless body under the sheet, a tear trickled down her cheek. She reached up and wiped it away. Her fingertip came back bloody. She looked up at Raymond. His eyes widened at the sight of her bloody tear-stained face.

He fumbled in his pockets, then opened a desk drawer and pulled out a box of tissues. He shoved them across the desk at her. “Doctors make mistakes all the time. Clearly, something is medically wrong.” He indicated towards her face. “Maybe severe head trauma and an undetectable heartbeat made them pronounce you dead. Now, if you’re interested in suing, I can help you with that.”

Zoe waved his explanation aside. “It’s more than the



waking up in the morgue. I drank blood.”

“Okay.” Raymond drew the word out like only a Canadian could. “Did you borrow it from the blood bank, or did you chomp down on a neck and suck it out?”

“Um...” Zoe didn’t want to tell him. She knew he was two seconds away from kicking her out of his office, and she needed his help. “I know you think I’m crazy or making this up, but I can prove it. Follow me.”

Zoe stood up and walked out of the office to the bathroom across the hallway. She opened the door and stood before the small mirror that hung over the sink. She felt Raymond behind her. “See.”

“I don’t see you. I see me, but I don’t see you.” He moved his face closer to the mirror then waved his hand between her face and the mirror. Only his hand reflected back. “Whoa.”

“Exactly. Waking up in the morgue. Drinking blood. No reflection. I’m definitely a vampire, and I need to know how to stay alive. I mean stay dead. Damn it! I mean undead.”

Raymond backed slowly away from her. “I don’t know what you think I can do to help, Miss Evans.”

“Zoe. Listen, I’m not going to suck your blood. I have some control over this hunger thing. At least I think I do, but if I don’t find another vampire to tell me what to do and how to keep from being staked through the heart, I don’t know what could happen. Please, help me. I’m desperate.” She widened her green eyes and batted her eyelashes in her best imitation of damsel in distress.

“Please don’t do that,” Raymond said. “It’s a bit disconcerting with the bloody streaks on your cheeks.”

Zoe turned back to the sink. She couldn’t see her reflection, so she didn’t know how bad it was. She twisted the

tap, leaned down and splashed cold water on her face. Raymond handed her a paper towel. She dried her face and tossed the blood-stained towel in the trash.

“Come back into the office,” Raymond said with a sigh. “It’s not like I can afford to turn you down. You can pay me, right?”

“Yes,” Zoe said. If she had a working heart, it would skip a beat at the hope that she might get some answers.

Once they were seated, Raymond opened his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of bourbon. He splashed two fingers of the amber liquid into one of the dirty cups, glanced at it, and filled it to the brim. He held the bottle up to Zoe, but she shook her head.

Raymond took a big sip and sat silently observing her. She squirmed under his scrutiny, but she knew that he might change his mind, so she waited.

“Can you fly?”

“Don’t believe so. I tried to imagine myself turning into a bat and flying and it didn’t work.”

Raymond grunted and took another big gulp from the cup. “How about crosses? Holy water?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m saying. I don’t know what will hurt me and what won’t. I know the sun is an issue which is why I needed a detective with night hours.”

“Damn. I knew evening hours were a bad idea,” Raymond mumbled. He looked at his almost empty cup with regret. “What about silver? Or is that werewolves?”

“Um...I think it’s vampires, too, but I don’t know.”

“We could try to experiment and see what hurts,” Raymond suggested.

“Really? That’s your solution? I don’t think so. One silver stake to the heart, and my life is over.” Zoe giggled as she

realized the irony of her statement.

“Hmm...so what exactly *did* you come here for?”

Zoe scrunched her nose as she thought. “I need you to find me a master vampire. Someone who can teach me the ropes. Kind of like a mentor.”

“A mentor vampire. Right.” Raymond nodded his head. He unscrewed the cap on the bottle and took a drink. “\$500 upfront and \$250 a day plus expenses. I help you out for three days and see what I can dig up. But one flash of a fang my way, and I’ll stake you so quick your head will spin. Got it?”

Zoe grinned then quickly wiped the smile away for fear that a fang might show. “Got it. Thank you, Raymond. You don’t know how much I appreciate this.”

“You can thank me by giving me the retainer.”

“Do you take credit cards?” she asked.

“I take everything but American Express.”

Twenty minutes later, Zoe had signed a contract, paid the retainer, and provided Raymond with all the details he would need to get started on her case.

“I’m staying at the Hotel De L’Acarde in room thirteen. I’ll call you tomorrow evening to see what you’ve found.” Zoe stood up and held her hand out.

Raymond hesitated for a moment before he reached out and shook it. “You need to get some gloves. The dead cold is a definite giveaway.”

Zoe raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment. “I’ll speak to you tomorrow.”

She left Raymond’s office with him staring morosely at his empty bourbon bottle.

## chapter eight

*Emily Thrash*

THE DOOR SWUNG SHUT behind her. She had hoped the Paris air would provide some relief from the stagnant air inside Raymond's office, but all she could smell was the reek of human effort, sweat and urine and rot—and, of course—blood. She still recognized the smell of blood for the sour, coppery smell she always had known it to be, but suddenly, metallic and bitter and acidic seemed like fine and delicate combination, the kind of fine sauce she'd most hoped to experience in culinary Paris. The thought twisted her somewhere deep, reminding her of all the things she'd hoped to do with Kate. They'd both meshed and clashed in the planning of this trip, both knowing exactly which places were *cannot miss* but disagreeing on how detailed their plan should be in the in-between. Kate is—was—the open type, the kind to decide a few mile-markers with plenty of room to wander and explore in between. She had wanted most to spend some time pretending they were Parisians, find the places locals liked. Practice French phrases to see if they could pass, even for a minute. Zoe wanted that too, but wished she had a map for it.

She knew that was self-defeating, but so were most things about her life. She had a list of restaurants with notes on reviews, prices, rotating chefs. Useless now. Kate would've laughed at her wistful thoughts of *beurre blanc*, *béarnaise*, and *Espagnole*.

Kate was past tense. But she was too, in a way. Zoe-tourist-in-France was gone. Past tense, like Kate. Forever. The woman standing on the sidewalk--trying not to look like she had no idea where to go, smelling Paris whole city was a kitchen, not sauces and breads but more sanguine flavors—that was Zoe present. No sense in comparing choices of present Zoe to past-tense Zoe. To deceased Zoe. Was she deceased? She certainly didn't feel dead. She wanted to run, just to see how fast she could do it, but there were still people on the street. There were probably always people on the street of Paris.

She had to move. Arbitrarily, she chose right. She tried to ignore the layers of smell, but found she could discern more than she wanted from each passer-by. That brunette woman had eaten sushi. This couple of Asian tourists were practically sweating red wine. That old German man smelled of old German beer.

The city was bright as day, but she had no concept of the time. She'd never been good at gauging time as it passed, whether it had been ten minutes or forty since she'd last checked, and now she felt sick at the thought her life might depend on it. Would the barest lightening of the sky at dawn be her end? She should know, by some blood-given instinct, but she didn't know the boundaries, the precise limits of what she was now. All she was sure of was that was not what she had been. That Zoe was past tense, and this Zoe was now. That was why she so desperately needed someone—anyone—to guide her. She was new, a child that didn't know how to

avoid dangers like the hot stove, how to take care of herself. How to get food.

Paris was a glorious juxtaposition of old and new. Centuries old facades and arches, spotted with people ill-suited the background. She spotted types as she walked without much intent, automatically noting women likely to pause on her ads and click on them. She mentally composed copy for each of them, a familiar game to keep her sharp. The mom on her phone chewing her fingernail—*how to keep him guessing*. She smelled of cheap white wine and expensive skin lotion. The woman in her late twenties that was trying to look like the was seventeen in the oversized sweatshirt and running shorts—*you'd never guess you could get this look for so little \$\$*. She smelled of sugar. The man wearing a *Big Bang Theory* t-shirt and looking around like he wonders what the big fuss is all about—*the gift that gives back*. She'd pair that last one with the lingerie section, of course.

*This is a ghost habit, she thought. Dead Zoe did this because this was dead's Zoe's job. I'll likely never write product description or hook copy again. Who cares where these people shop or if I can hook them on some trashy clothing?*

The smile on her face came as a surprise. She even reached up with her fingertips to test it. She always liked her job, but found herself excited at the prospect of leaving it behind. She never cared about *what* she was getting someone to buy, but she found a perverse pleasure in the persuasion of it. In the new world, it wasn't about selling ice to Eskimos. It was about making the ice look irresistible in just the right way, posh and perfect and promising, to draw those clicks. To get the bite.

She suddenly realized she'd been walking faster and faster as she thought and a woman striding down the sidewalk at a near run with no visible effort may draw attention. She forced

herself to slow down, and then a new thought stopped her dead. It was about getting the bite. Persuasion.

Designing perfectly targeted banner ads may be behind her, but persuasion didn't have to be. Her new speed was apparent in her movement, and she could feel the strength in her limbs and it changed the way she saw the world. She knew she could climb a building as easily as wide set of stairs. Perhaps she had more than these new physical abilities. She had vague notions about the human pets in vampire stories. Weren't vampires supposed to be able to hypnotize others? Besides, hadn't she always been able to, in her own way? Too late to try it on Raymond, but that would be too risky anyway. She couldn't just go up to the ATM and withdraw her money or try to use Kate's. She was dead and needed to stay that way, and appearing on an ATM camera would dispel that quickly. If she would show up on the camera at all. And if she didn't, the ATM dispensing her money to an invisible girl would be just as suspicious. But if she could find someone, someone she could persuade to use the card for her, it may look like ordinary, garden variety credit card theft. He'd be caught, but she'd be gone, and his story of a woman in the night may convince the Paris police or it may not, but they'd surely consider many explanations before ever approaching the truth.

She needed a target. Her new smell along with all her practice would tell her what she needed to sell herself if she just found the right mark. She continued walking, forcing her legs to stroll at a pace that felt unnaturally slow but in her living reality would have winded her eventually.

A quartet of elderly women smelled of peppermint and ink and she didn't give them a second glance. A woman walked alone, a possibility, smelling of grease and powdered sugar, but her shoulders were set square and up and her hands were

firmly in her pockets, probably gripping her keys or maybe even mace. All shields up, on guard. No good. Zoe changed her path back towards the tourist areas. It was just after midnight, and she had an idea of where to find someone who may be looking for someone like her.

There was a row of shining bars with picturesque Parisian verandas lined with white iron trellises around the corner from a trio of hotels that advertised in English. She'd made note of them earlier and had wanted to go to get a picture with Kate on one of those verandas—the hallmark picture of a weekend in Paris. Kate would have mocked her for wanting something so Instagram basic, but she would have also insisted on getting one with her phone too.

The sounds of laughter and light, meaningless talk spilled out on to the sidewalks as Zoe watched from the shadow of an alcove down the street. Groups of young people came and went, frequently in even numbers, couples with arms linked. They smelled of alcohol and bread and bathrooms. Finally, she saw the arrangement she'd hoped for and fell in line behind the small group as they walked away toward the hotels. It was a group of five people, about her own age, talking loudly in brash American accents. A beautiful blonde woman, tall and svelte held the hand of an equally tall and svelte man while walking arm in arm with a curvy, shorter woman with bushy red hair. A man who wore a beard carefully manicured to look rugged walked along ahead of them, snapping pictures with his phone. Behind them, hands in his pockets with his shoulders slumped, ambled the third man, barrel-chested and good looking, though not quite as handsome as his mated companions. He tapped the bearded man and attempted to joke with him about something, and the bearded man nodded dismissively. Her mark put his hands back in his pockets and



fell once again ten steps behind his companions, looking around as if being ignored didn't bother him. She could see as well as smell how much he had drunk, various cocktails and pale beers. He couldn't quite go in a straight line.

They started across a street at an angle, and Zoe put a quick burst in her speed to come nearly even with them before giving out a sharp cry. She felt their eyes turn towards her and she fell to the ground. She turned to sit and gripped her ankle and made noises as if she'd twisted it. In a moment, the third man was kneeling beside her, asking her if she'd hurt herself and if she could walk.

She gathered all her will and tried to reach out with her voice and her eyes. "Yes," she said. "Help me up."

He braced her under each elbow and helped her to her feet, and she looked up at him and caught his gaze with her own. She had him. She swayed slightly to the left and he swayed with her, his eyes locked on hers and his jaw slightly slack.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"David," he said, nearly whispering.

She smiled at him and found she had no need to blink at all. "Tell your friends to go on without you, David."

He matched her smile and waved his friends on calling, "I'll catch up at the hotel" without so much as looking over his shoulder. Quietly, as if he was afraid more than a whisper may scare her away, he said "I love your accent. British, right?"

"Yes. I like yours too."

He chuckled, "Oh I don't really have an accent. I'm from California."

"Where are you staying?"

"I'm not the best at pronouncing it," he admitted, and stumbled over something that may have been

“Montparnasse”.

“Do they have an ATM there?” His eyes grew wide at this, and she quickly added, “I just need a little favor.” She imagined her voice reaching out and wrapping around his throat. She pushed mentally with her eyes, trying to nudge his will out of the way with her own. Supplant any ideas he had of his own with the simple desire to do as she asked, whatever she asked.

He seemed to go numb, his jaw slackened and eyes lost focus. “Sure,” he said, so slurred it seemed to come out “shhhore”.

Trying not to lose his gaze, she turned and took his arm. “Let’s go, then.” She said.

He made some guttural noise of ascent and moved in a direction away from where his friends had been heading. The Montparnasse was a moderate hotel, clean and modern and tasteful. Zoe saw a doorman and told David to keep walking past until they had reached the next street. She looked for a shadowed place to tell him what was next. Here was the true test of her ability. She’d been keeping her commands simple, single steps. No complex instructions. She tried to rehearse what she’d tell him so there’d be no question of his obedience. Take this card, ATM, code 6897, withdraw the machine’s maximum. She hoped it was high. She’d have him use Kate’s card, too, but would likely have to repeat the process. She led David down an alley beside his hotel and found an alcove next to a delivery entrance.

Before she could open her mouth to give his orders, he was kissing her, his arms wrapped tightly around her shoulders. She pushed him away and stammered. “What are you doing?”

He chuckled and came forward, “Is kissing not allowed? I

thought that as only in the movies.”

She looked up at him and tried to recapture his eyes, trap his will within hers. “I need you to go to the ATM,” she started.

“Oh, no,” he countered. “I will, don’t you worry, if I need to. But after. I’m looking forward to our transaction, but I’m no rube for you to take.”

She had no control over him, and with a sinking sensation in her stomach, realized she never had.

“No—I’m not—”

He was on her again and pressed her against the side of the brick building, groping at her clumsily with slick, greasy hands. It would not do.

She recovered from her surprise and remembered her own strength. She gripped him by the shoulders and lifted him off of her, off of the ground and turned him around, pressed his back against the brick. She had only meant to take control of the situation, since her mind-control had evidently only been an illusion. But as she remembered her strength, she also remembered her hunger, and before he could articulate any words of surprise or fear she lunged at him, her mouth at his throat. It was silent, her bite too fierce to allow any scream or protest. He grew limp in her arms as she took him. His blood was hot and bitter with drink, and she could feel the dizzying effect of the alcohol in his blood on her own mind.

She let him drop to the ground, where he crumpled like a spent rag. Perhaps it was the blood or the buzz from his second hand alcohol, or perhaps it was lingering bitterness from being mistaken for a prostitute, but she could not gather enough pity to feel guilty. Her only concern was getting away from him, but perhaps he could be useful still. His pockets held a cellphone, which she smashed, a wallet with cards, a bill

fold with nearly 600 Euros, and a hotel key in a thin envelope with the number 488 written on it.

She pocketed the cash and hesitated. 488.

It was risky, but a man who had nearly 600 casually on him may have more in his room. Besides, she needed a place to clean up.

She wiped her mouth on his shirt and tossed everything she'd touched from his pockets. Forcing herself again into a casual stride, she went back to the main entrance of the hotel. She tried to look tired, too exhausted for pleasantries, and ignored the doorman's "bonjour".

She made directly for the elevators and was pleased when the doors opened immediately and she stepped in. It wasn't until the doors shut that she realized her mistake. The elevator's walls were each mirrored, and each shone resolutely blank. She looked up and saw that the elevator had a camera in the corner. Was there an active guard on the other side of that feed? Would he notice the impossible girl with no reflection? Or would the elevator seem to be moving all on its own? Would they connect it to the body outside when he was found? Had she just revealed the existence of her species before she could even find another like herself?

Nothing to be done about it now. She'd take the stairs on the way down. Thankfully no one rode with her.

In the room, she worked quickly. She reasoned she had some time, as his friends had been crawling to another bar. She used a wash rag from the bathroom as a make-shift glove. In one suitcase, she found an expandable file with six cities labeled. "Paris" was empty, their first stop, by the looks of it. London, Dublin, Edenborough, Amsterdam, and Reykjavik held plane tickets for five, hotel reservation receipts, and envelopes of cash, Euros and American dollars not yet

exchanged. She took the Euros, more than she needed, and left the American. It looked like plenty to get the other four home. And to ship him back, she thought and the first reckoning of what she had done threatened to overcome her.

*Not here, she told herself. Secure Raymond's help. Find a safe place. Then you can freak out in private.*

She washed her hands and used the washcloth, already tinged red from her fingers, to wipe neck and lips. Altogether, there wasn't much blood. She'd made a neat meal of him, whatever that was worth.

She left the do not disturb on the handle and looked for the stairs. She groaned. The only stairs featured a sign in five languages, the second she could read easily. "Fire Exit Only. Alarm Will Sound."

She weighed the options and headed back to the elevator. If an alarm sounded, there was no way she'd get four floors down without being seen. With the elevator, she had at least the chance of being alone. She flinched at the impossible sight of the empty mirrors. It was enough to make her dizzy, surrounded by her own lack of image. The sure proof she was no longer like everyone else.

She pressed the main floor's button and froze when the elevator stopped only one floor down. A father and young son, in coordinating pajamas, stood outside the doors as they slid open. The boy, no more than five, stood rubbing his red eyes, fresh from a recent tantrum, by all appearances. The father was texting one-thumbed and gave just the barest glance at her as they boarded the elevator. She tried not to move, found for the first time that breathing was just a habit she no longer needed. The father did not look up from his phone as the door shut, nor as they descended the two remaining floors. The little boy rubbed his face and as the elevator was nearly to

the bottom, looked around and his little round face grew confused. He looked at Zoe, then at his own reflection, at Zoe again.

“Vati?” he said and tugged on the man’s hand.

The man looked down at him as the elevator doors open and spoke sharply in German. He did not look at the mirror as Zoe slipped past him and through the opening doors.

She exhaled out of habit when she made it to the street and headed straight for Raymond’s. She hoped she had not taken too long.

## chapter nine

*Jaysen O'Dell*

THE STREET WAS ODDLY empty. Maybe it was just his imagination. According to Ms Evans he and his “kind” were nothing more than cattle. Looking at his watch he realized the street is always empty this time of night.

“Every time someone wants to meet this late, it’s always bizarre” Raymond muttered to no one. It seemed the only work anyone wanted was “find my lover” or “I need to get out of trouble”. The former never ended ... pretty. The latter always made him feel dirty. But this one...

Looking down the street he saw Marie chatting with one of the other staff at Bistrot De L’Opera Comique. Her dancer form not yet hidden beneath a layer of “free to eat anything” fat. Firm but very shapely all Raymond could think was “I need some of that”.

Walking toward Marie the words of the conversation in French carried up the street.

“He’s a really nice guy. I just wish he’d make a move”, said Marie.

“If he’s so nice, why don’t you go for it?” asked the companion Raymond had never seen before.

“It’s just not his style. He *seems* interested but he never says or does anything.”

“Sounds like a loser to me.”

“When is the last time a loser cheated on you? I’m tired of that. I want a real man who will grow old with me. Realizing I wasn’t going to be a ballerina the rest of my life... I want more!”

Raymond’s mind was racing. “F—k! She’s found a guy. Now what? We are in France where you can change lovers faster than underwear, but that’s not what I want. One chick all to myself till I’m bored”. By now he was just across the street from Marie.

“Well, I tend to avoid losers as I have some self-respect” the companion said.

“Yeah, like those three guys last Tuesday? You install a revolving door yet?”

A late 20 something sauntered up to the pair and said “If you ladies need a real man, I’m here”

Marie just looked at him. Raymond started to cross the street.

“Ray-Mond!” Marie always said his name with emphasis on the second syllable. He never told her, being Canadian, he spoke French as easily as English. They always spoke English together.

“Good evening Marie. How are you?”

She slid over to him, put her arm through his, and tilted her head to his shoulder. “I am fin” she said. “Rachel (she said it “rashell”) and I were just discussing the menu when this ... how do you say ... tool? ... interrupted our conversation”.

“Is this the man?” Rachel said in French.

“That’s not a man” the ‘tool’ said. Raymond struggled to look as if he didn’t understand.



“Yes. He’s more man than you’ll ever be.”

“He looks uncomfortable.”

“I explained to him that he’s saving me from ... you. Now leave. I’m not available and she has ... some disease, I’m sure. And we aren’t open yet.”

“Say, I hate to interrupt, but do you mind if I make a quick sandwich? I need to go find some info for a young lady.” Raymond said it to no one in particular. But Marie always let him make a quick meal if they weren’t open.

The ‘tool’ walked away. The companion was still looking at Marie angrily. Marie looked up at him slightly. “I have a plate waiting for you. Come in!”

The salad with house made dressing, a perfectly seasoned bit of rabbit and cup of soup were perfect for the April evening. When she brought him a glass of wine from her father’s vineyard he forgot all about his case. Listening to her relive the conversation she didn’t know he had already understood he felt a little guilty. Not for the eavesdropping but for the sheer pleasure of hearing her french accent make the most mundane words arousing. Damn she was perfect. But who was this man she wanted so desperately.

“And then he said you were a boy”.

“I think said I am ‘not a real man’. But who cares? You always take care of me. Who can complain about a few words after a meal like that?”

“Ah, thank you! My aunt says ‘never let a good man see anything but the good you bring and he will be yours’. And since this is her place...” Marie shrugged. “I like that saying. You?”

“It does seem like any fool would be able to see what a wonderful person you are if you follow her advice.”

Marie looked at him puzzled.

“Everything Ok?” Raymond asked.

“Ray-Mond, do you solve your cases? Are your clients happy with you?”

“Well, the Google reviews say they are. That’s how this crazy lady found me.”

“I wonder though... sometimes you seem to miss the obvious.” She sighed. “Tell me about the ‘crazy lady’ and see if I can help you.”

“Well, this Zoe Evans girl and her friend Kate Fisher decide to come ‘party in Paris’ for a weekend. They arrived 2 weeks ago. They are artists and have been here before so didn’t think anything about wondering the streets on a Friday night. Coming out of a bar, they get attacked by... Zoe didn’t know how many people. It was fast and quick. She just remembers a pain in neck. Next thing she knows she’s on a cold bed made of metal, she’s under a sheet but it’s bright. She sits up and realizes she’s in some type of operating room. She see’s Kate on a different table with very bright lights. Kate is cut open with her organs on the counter behind the table. Zoe runs out of the room and into the street. As she’s running away she sees one word on the building. Morgue. She runs a few blocks, leans on a wall and realizes she’s naked. I don’t know why she told me that, but she did. Luckily she was only a few blocks from her hotel and the concierge was very discrete letting her back into her room. Next day, as she opened the curtains over her window, she realized her skin was instantly burning. She went to the bathroom to put water on the burn. She looked up at the mirror and didn’t see her own reflection. She panicked and passed out. She called the cops who refused to believe her. The morgue returned her belongings as ‘stolen by a thief’. She’s running out of money and needs to know what is happening to her. She thinks she is a vampire. That means

there has to be at least one more (to make her a vampire, right?). She wants me to find this vampire so she can, and I quote her here, ‘get advice on how to be a vampire’. She also mentioned that she’s very hungry even though she’s eating regular meals. She can ‘smell our hearts’ but she seemed confused when she said that.

“That’s what I have. It’s crazy. I feel bad taking her money but... I have to eat too, right?”

“Ray-Mond, my aunt gives me freedom to feed my friends. You will never be hungry. I can make many meals for you.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to take advantage of you.” Raymond was a bit confused. He felt like he was missing something obvious with Marie. He felt he was in a fog and she was a form just indistinguishable in the mist.

“Do you remember the ‘Vampire Diaries?’” she asked him.

“Isn’t that the one where some guy wrote stories about vampires that seemed too real? I think the police investigated him after the first two books?”

“Oui! I mean yes! That’s the one. He lives near my father’s estate and visits them daily for some wine and cheese. He fancies my mother. If you want I can take you to meet my family and we can talk with Vicky Kite in person. But I must warn you, he’s ... different.”

“Does he think he’s a vampire?”

“No. That would be easier, I’m sure.”

“When should I pick up?”

“Shall we call it a date? Meet here at eight tomorrow morning. Transportation is easy.”

Raymond stood up and Marie handed the dishes to a young man. It dawned on Raymond that throughout the meal Marie had mentioned her aunt and referred to the bistro as “her place”. The wine was from “her father’s vineyard”.

The author of one of the most widely read series of all time is a “friend of the family”. It was clear that the bistro had opened while they were talking but no one had interrupted them once. There must be more to Marie than he realized. Maybe he set his sights too high.

“It is a date. Until tomorrow!” she said excitedly.

She stood in the door way as he walked back to his office. Another night on that damn grey couch. He hated that couch. It was better than paying rent on a place that one on would ever see. Looking back toward the bistro he could see her curves silhouetted in the doorway. “I could never take her to that couch. I need to be realistic.”

He turned to wave. She blew him a kiss. His parting thought was “How can I make her notice me?”

Raymond walked to the door at seven fifty five. He had walked a block to a bakery and picked up two pastries and two coffees. One black, one with extra cream and sugar. “Someone like her can’t possibly drink black coffee” the had thought at the time. He noticed a black Citroen C6 with a classically dressed chauffeur standing next to it.

“Monsieur Ray-Mond?” the chauffeur asked.

“Yes?” Raymond was confused.

“Mademoiselle Marie nous attend à l'aéroport... Oh! My apologies! Miss Marie waits for us at the airport.”

“She’s waiting at the airport?”

“Oui. Yes. You are visiting her home, yes?”

“Uh, yeah. But..”

“You must get in or we will be late. You can call me Jacques, but I am told ‘Jack’ is easier for you.” Jack opened the door for Raymond. “You can hand those to me.”

“I ... uh ... ok.” Raymond sat in the back seat of the car and the door closed with a light click. “Damn!” he muttered

before Jack could get in.

Jack sat in his drivers seat with a smile. "Sit well sir. We shall move quickly!" As he started the car he touched his ear and said in french "I have the young man. He brought you breakfast. I understand now. We will be there in 30 minutes. Yes madam, I have arranged for traffic. Yes, I will talk to your father. He will be impressed with his promptness."

Raymond looked out the window. He realized that the car had not stopped moving since it left the curb. Not a light. Not a pedestrian. He had never been in a car with a driver so lucky as Jack. Jack never had to touch the breaks except to slow for a corner. Jack drove them up to an airport gate labeled "membres exécutifs seulement" (executive members only) which opened without Jack removing his hands from the steering wheel. Before Raymond could question anything, Jack pulled up to a helipad, opened Raymond's door and lead him to a helicopter.

Opening the door Jack said, "Ms Marie is in here sir."

As Raymond climbed into the helicopter he muttered, "we forgot the..."

"I shall rejoin you shortly sir" Jack said as he closed the door.

Looking up Raymond saw Marie.

"This is the quickest way to get home" she said.

"Marie, why are we in a helicopter?"

"I said it is the quickest what to get home." She smiled at him with the same smile his mother used with him.

The engines had started and the rotors on the helicopter were getting up to speed. The door opened stopping Raymond from asking another stupid question. Jack slid into the small seat next to the door. Once the door had closed he addressed Marie in french "The drive was uneventful miss. He had a

black coffee and a heavily sweetened and creamed coffee. One sweet pastry and one tart pastry. He is a thoughtful if slightly oblivious man. Your mother will appreciate him. Your father... is your father.”

Marie replied in english, “Jack, I’ve said that Mr Ray-Mond does not speak french. Please use english. Ray-Mond, Jack was just saying how you thoughtfully brought sweets for breakfast. My mother has a brunch planned. Can you wait?”

“I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say...”

“The polite answer is Oui. Yes” said Jack gently.

“Jack! Leave Ray-Mond alone!”

“I am honored that your mother would go to the effort a making a brunch for me.”

“See Jack, he’s just in shock. Ray-Mond only knows me as a failed ballerina working at a bistro.”

“You are not a failed ballerina!” Raymond was oddly angry at her self description containing the word ‘failed’. “Failure implies an inability to complete or inaccuracy in execution. I watched your last performance. Your decision to leave was not due to failure but a simple realization that you wanted something different from your life.”

Jack reverted to french and quietly said to Marie “Your father is no longer a problem”.

The city had faded way without anyone noticing or commenting. Raymond hadn’t realized he had been staring out the window - it was his first time in a helicopter - until Marie reached over and touched his knee.

“We will be landing at my father’s vineyard soon. May I give you some advice?”

“I think I need it. But I don’t ...”

“Ok. Introduce yourself with your full name. I hate to admit it, but I don’t know your last name. He is a hard man

but he is fair. Speak your mind, he will see it anyway. Compliment something but it must be sincere, even if it is just the weather.”

“Why am I here?”

Marie laughed. “To meet the author silly!”

“I don’t believe you.”

By the time they reached the house, only a few hundred meters from the helipad (who has a helipad in their side yard?), there was a line of people waiting for them. Raymond guessed that the people furthest from the house were servants and field hands while those closest to the house were the family. He was right. As they approached the line, Jack walked quickly to the house side of the line and stepped in place. Marie greeted each by name and with a kiss. Raymond became more nervous with each step. When they passed Jack Marie started to give each person a hug in addition and told Raymond her relation to the person.

“This is my cousin, he is learning to tend the vines. This is my niece, she is studying to become a chef, this is my uncle, he manages the mechanic shop.” This continued till there were only three people left, two men and a woman. “Once I greet my mother I will be pulled to the kitchen. You will meet my father alone. Unless you count Vicky... Hello mother! It has been too long!” and with that Marie was pulled away. The line dispersed leaving Raymond and two strangers staring at each other.

Both men were in their 60s. Maybe 70. One was well dressed with pressed seams in his trousers. The other wore common field clothes and had dirt on his trouser knees. Raymond walked up to the man with dirty knees, held out his hand and said “Good morning sir. I am Louis Raymond. Thank you for welcoming me to your home. Your daughter is

magnificent and deserves everything she desires.”

The man laughed loudly. “She coached you well! Most of the men compliment my house or my vines or my ‘stuff’ or my wife.” The latter was said with a bit of a growl and was clearly directed at Vicky, the only other person around. “You are much much smarter than them. I’m François but all my english speaking friends call me Frank. Call me Frank. Go take care of business with ... him. Then come find me and we can talk business of our own.”

As he turned he yelled into the house in french “He says you are magnificent and should be given the world! I have not agreed to him yet but I like him!” He walked toward a path in the hedge humming a tune Raymond had never heard.

“He hums that all the time.” Vicky Kite had gotten close to Raymond without being noticed. “I hear you want to talk to me about vampires.” He said vampires like it was some secret word that couldn’t be said out loud.

“Yes sir. If you have time.”

“I’m rich thanks to ... them. I have more time than things to do. So if you want to talk let’s talk. But let’s be comfortable and drunk when we do it.” Vicky started to walk into the house motioning Raymond to follow. A maid was passing by and his hand found its way to her buttock. She winked at him. “You’ve probably realized I’m not a local.” He picked up a bottle of wine and two glasses. “I moved here from Texas when I was 32.” He grabbed a loaf of fresh bread. “Got here, had an experience, wrote it down, got rich.” They were outside on a large porch of sorts. Vicky plopped down on an overstuffed chair, put the glasses and bread on a small table next to the chair, motioned Raymond into the chair opposite. Vicky turned his attention to the bottle of wine. “You know, I miss the days when all I could afford was a twist top. None of



these corks to deal with. Damn things get in the way of drinking!”

Raymond wasn’t paying any attention. His mind was still back in the greeting line. “Your daughter is magnificent... what the hell was I thinking? Why were we in a helicopter? Who are these people? She deserves everything... f—k me. I’m not sure if she even cares I’m alive! How damn corny can I be!”

“... you want a glass or not?” Vicky was clearly annoyed.

“Please”

“Rethinking your greeting to the old man?”

“Yeah.”

“I gotta hand it to you ... that was a real humdinger of an opening line. Let it all hang out and see if he’ll accept it. Back home some girls poppa or brother would have shot you for that. ‘She’s magnificent!’ She must have rocked your world in the sack.”

“What? No! This is the first time we’ve met away from ... she called it a date.”

“Oh shit son. Are you slow? Do you even know where you are?”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“Son Frankies daughter brought you home to meet the family and you ain’t ever been outside the bistro? What are you, Canadian?”

“Yes I am.”

“Damn. You guys always got the ‘nice Canadian’ thing going for you. There’s been a line of hounds sniffing after that tail for ...”

“If you’re talking about Marie I’d appreciate it if you’d be less ... crude.”

“Yep. You’re Canadian. And you don’t even know you’ve

surrendered to the french. Ain't you some kind of private dick? Supposed to figure stuff out and all?"

"That's why I'm here."

"You keep telling yourself that son."

"I need to know how you made your books so realistic."

"Ya write what you know."

"So you're a vampire."

Raymond's statement of fact shocked Vicky into a moment of sober seriousness.

"Son, we are outside. In the sun. I'm not a vamp. And most of what's in my books is shit. I made a lot of it up to protect someone."

"Explain that."

"Back when I moved here ... '86 it was and not 'here' here but to Europe ... I was working a contract welding things I'm not supposed to talk about for the US government. Me and some of my hairy assed welder buddies heard about a party and decided to go. The minute we walked in there was this girl. Damn she was hot. Watched her all night long but she was with this dick-wad cow f—ker the size of three of me. So I left them alone. I had my back to them at the bar and looked up in the mirror to watch her move. Damn she moved fine. But that cow f—ker was dancing alone. I spun around thinking I would get my shot but she was still in his arms. I looked in the mirror and there he was dancing all lone.

"Now I won't say I didn't do some fun shit back when I was young. But I was stone straight that night 'The feds checked us often. 'Just say no' applied to us more than congress. That chick had no reflection. 'That's freaky right? So I just manned up, walked over and started to interrupt. That cow f—ker started to say something but she put her hand up, looked at him and said 'leave'. I've never seen a man that size

get out of Dodge that fast. She looks at me and says ‘I’ve been waiting. What took you so long?’ We danced for 30 seconds... well she danced, I just watched ... she sighed and took me outside.

“I know what you saw. I am what you think I am. I’m not hungry but I am ... horny.’ I’d suggest she wasn’t when she slipped away early the next morning. I never saw her again. But that night... she melted my brain with what she did to me. Between our ... sessions ... I asked her questions. She answered them. What hurts them? What kills them? Do they fly? How do they sleep? You know all the crap from the movies. But the truth... is boring. So I took a few of the things she said about her everyday life and wrote those damn books. Like I said, it’s mostly shit. But I’m f—king rich.”

“That’s it?” Raymond asked.

“Yep. All my interviews about it being real are partially true. Mostly shit though.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“Well, when Marie called and asked me to meet with over this case thing I had two thoughts. First was ‘if Marie is bringing this guy to meet me, he’s either a cow-f—ker and if she is she needs to see it’. The second was ‘if she’s still out there maybe he can find her’. See she told me about your case and it adds up.”

“So you think my client is a vampire?”

“Sounds like it to me. And I f—cked one.”

“And you don’t know where your mystery dancer is?”

“F—ck no! I don’t even know her name. I’m not Canadian. Just a one night stand for me. I know my kind. I’m just dick head cow f—cker. Takes one to know one. And I ain’t letting one of my kind get their hands on Marie.”

“Wait. Are you saying I’m really here to ‘meet the

parents’?”

“Son you are the worst damn private dick ever! Hell yes! The fact you ain’t nailed that yet... if my vote counted you’d be in the will already.”

“She doesn’t even like me...”

“She brought you home you ass! In a helicopter. IN DADDY’S HELICOPTER”

“Oh shit!”

“Yeah!”

Vicky got up and left Raymond with the bottle. Raymond realized that only one glass had wine in it. His.

“Louis (pronounce ‘lou-eee’), brunch is served.” Marie was in the doorway. Someone told her is first name. At some point she changed into a slim, very form fitting burgundy dress. His breath caught in his chest. He didn’t even remember what she was wearing before but he didn’t care.

“The perfected image of female form and purity of purpose.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that outloud.”

“F—ck you did!” Vicky yelled from someplace. “You meant every damn word and I already translated it!”

“I’m sorry about Vicky. I told you he was ... different.”

“He’s just American. I’m used to them. He kind of makes me homesick.”

“You’re homesick? That isn’t good for us.”

“What? No. Us? Wait? I don’t plan to go back to Canada.”

“That’s good.”

“Us... you need to explain why I’m here.”

“Do you not want to be here? Do you not want to be with me?”

“That’s not fair. This place is amazing. So are you. But

shouldn't we go on dates or something?"

"Why? Don't we already know everything that is important? Tell me what you know about me?"

"Look around you! I don't feel like I know anything! And you even admitted you didn't know my name!"

"What's a name? You know me! You do. Ignore all this and tell me about me!"

"Louis," Frank was in the doorway, "Has my daughter brought you here under false pretense?"

"No sir. Your daughter... she would never do such a thing. But I'm... I've been accused of being the worst detective ever and I'm starting to agree."

"Poppa, we are having a ... fight. May we have some privacy?"

Frank closed the door and bellowed in french "Leave them in peace!"

"Your father, does everyone listen when he orders?"

"You are changing the subject, but no. He is married. He knows his place." She smiled. "Let us get back to this 'us' you are so confused about."

"We've never gone out!"

"We eat together every day."

"We've never talked about the future!"

"I want more, a family. You want to help people but have no home. You think you want to be a ... how do you say ... player, but you don't."

"What makes you say that?"

"You rescued me from the tool man yesterday. But you never mentioned that you understood our conversation or his comment."

"What? How did you..."

"When I was telling you about the conversation you

corrected what he said. You speak french. Which means you understood everything that has been said around you. Yet you do nothing. You are either a man of honor or a stupid man.”

“I think I’m stupid.”

“Mamma agrees. ‘If he knew and did nothing, then he is stupid or gay. You can manage stupid. He is nice to look at.’ She made me change. You saw me. I think you are not gay? You are not gay?”

“I am not.”

Marie quickly moved to sit on his lap. She turned and kissed him quickly on the lips.

A quick exclamation in french came from the door “Stop his blushing and bring him in.”

“I uh...”

“Momma’s brunch is ready. She was a little upset that you brought pastry and coffee but when she realized you never once asked about my finances or family and heard James describe what you brought she was less angry. But come. You need to go find father and bring him to brunch. He is in his office.”

She hopped off his lap and pulled him into the house. Speaking in french she said “Momma, he prefers Ray-Mond. Ray-Mond, my momma is ...”

“As beautiful as her daughter” Raymond interrupted in perfect french. “May I refer to you as momma?”

She simply waived her hand at him, pointed to a hallway and pulled Marie toward the large eating hall. The entire estate was gathered in the hall. As Marie entered the room she turned to look back at Raymond and winked.

Raymond stood for a minute. As he turned to the hallway Vicky was there.

“Son, you ok with this?”

“I’m not sure what ‘this’ is...”

“Well, you’re about to meet with this most powerful man in Burgundy. One of the most powerful men in France. He’s negotiated billions of dollars in business. He’s now negotiating for his daughter.”

“What? With me?”

“She brought you home you dim wit. She picked you. I heard you say ‘she deserves everything she desires’. You’ve doomed yourself with that one.”

Raymond just stood there. Vicky stepped to the side and pointed to the hallway. “Word of advice? Be honest. If you’re not he will end your life without touching you. I’ve watched him ruin people bigger than either of us. That’s how I know he likes me. He’s waiting for you.”

Raymond walked down the hall. “It’s ALWAYS the last door” he thought to himself. He could hear men talking as he neared the door. “Be honest.” Twice he had been told that. In french he said “gentlemen, I’m approaching the door.”

“That is an odd greeting from a hallway” an unseen Frank replied.

As he entered the room, Raymond said “Sir, I believe that you may be unclear on your own privacy and I did not want you to feel...”

“Violated?”

“Yes”

“Why did you not tell Marie that you spoke french? And you speak it very well if I may say so.”

“In my line of business it helps for folks to believe I can not. They tend to talk freely when they think I am not able to understand. I am not a legal representative so there is no violation of law.”

“I see. It was all about business then?”

“If you mean me being quiet about my french, yes. But if you mean...”

“I mean about my daughter!” Frank was upset. One of the men adjusted his coat.

“I never intended to eavesdrop on your daughter. I never once took action because I assumed she was interested in someone more ... worthy. I’m a private investigator. She’s a former ballerina. I have nothing to offer her.”

“She has said the same. Why did you always meet her at the bistro? The free meals?”

“I never asked for them free. I was hungry. The door was open. I asked for a sandwich. I offered to pay. She said I should come back. I did. I always met her there because she never offered otherwise. And I never asked because...”

“She was a ballerina. We’ve covered that.” Frank sat for a moment. Raymond realized one of the men was Jack. The other he did not know. Frank started to hum his song.

“My wife likes you. My daughter... we know her feelings or we would not be here. Jack, he speaks highly of you but he thinks you should look for a different profession based on how surprised you are at ... this” Frank gestured in a way to indicate everything including the reason for this conversation. “I ... I hate you. But not because you are bad.”

“You hate me because your man can’t find anything on me.”

“You know him?” Jack asked.

“I do not. But I know you. When Frank was angry you stayed still. He was ready to act. He’s ‘the muscle’ as Vicky would say. Which means the minute I gave you my name he started looking into me. There’s nothing there. The worst thing he told you I’ve already admitted; I have nothing to offer Marie.”



“That is why I hate you. You damnable Canadians and your ‘niceness’. I can find nothing to object too. What do you want?”

“Sir?”

“From me! You clearly don’t know who we are. What do you want from me and my daughter?”

“Sir, I feel I want only one thing. That is for Marie to be free to do as she pleases and for you to accept her decision.”

Frank looked at Raymond. “That is all?”

“Yes.”

“I have been defeated by a nice Canadian.”

Jack poured two small glasses of brandy. He handed one to Frank, the other to Raymond.

“To prosperity?” Frank offered.

“No. To the women that make us forget about wanting prosperity.”

Frank smiled and nodded. Jack said “They are waiting for you sir.”

At the meal Frank requested “Marie’s nice Canadian” sit at his right hand. Marie sat next to Raymond and managed to keep some physical contact with him the entire time. After the meal Frank and Brigitte (Marie’s mother) accompanied Marie and Raymond as they walked the grounds. Frank explained the operation of the business more than the making of wine. “To make wine you wait for nature to grow grapes, you make juice from the grapes, you wait for nature to make the juice wine, then you drink. That is all that matters until you stop being a private investigator.” Raymond learned that Frank owned business specializing in every step of wine making. That and he was ruthless in asserting control in each of those layers. In the last twenty years he had spread out into other areas of industry and finance. All of it logically connected to the small

vineyard they were walking in Burgundy. Vicky wasn't kidding. Frank could destroy you without touching you.

After the walk, Marie, Raymond and Jack climbed into the helicopter and returned to Paris. Marie sat as close to Raymond as she could without actually sitting on him. Jack pretended not to notice. The drive back to the bistro had many more stops. "Didn't you hear Jack say he 'arranged traffic' when he called me?" Marie said with a smile.

As the car came to a stop Raymond asked "Can I see you tomorrow?"

"I hope so!" Marie replied. "I expect to be next to you until then!"

"I uh... I don't know how that will work."

Jack closed the car door as they stood next to it. "Miss, you know I am hear when you are ready."

"What did he mean?"

"Let's walk to your place." Marie pulled him close and started walking toward Raymond's office.

"Frank told you..." Raymond muttered.

"He tried to convince me that you were a bad choice."

"Well, he may be right." Raymond muttered as he unlocked outer the door to his very meager office. "This is where no one sits." He held the inner door open for her "And this is what passes for my working office, bedroom, living room and everything else."

She looked at everything and asked "you sleep there?" pointing at the grey couch.

"I try. I work nights a lot. You know where I like to eat." He smiled at her.

She sat on the couch. "Did Vicky help you at all?"

"Not really. He did seem to collaborate some idea of Zoe's story, but in the end... he's not much help."

Marie pulled him onto the couch. “You know, my mother has many connections like Vicky. Maybe she can help.” She kissed him gently.

“Talking about your mother may not be the right thing here. Once I have some idea where to look, I may need her, and your father, to help.” He wasn’t sure this was all real. A woman way out of his league. Helping him find a vampire. Using her family connections to do so. Her family that seems to be able to control traffic. Traffic in Paris. And now she’s unbuttoning his pants.

Raymond immediately regretted everything about that damn couch.

## chapter ten

*Matthew Schillinger*

RAIN PATTERNED LIGHTLY ON the windshield of the taxi as it snaked through downtown Paris. Craig stared blankly from the back as the driver of the little grey Toyota Prius drove past cross streets one after another, blending into monotony, past the Arc de Triomphe, and other famous landmarks that became little more than blurs of color in the canvas of consciousness. On any other day, Craig would have been enamoured with the intricacy of the ancient buildings and some of the most renowned architectural marvels in the world.

But not today. Today, he was numb.

Everything was grey, like the little taxi that ferried him and the overcast sky above. His mind was a fog of unanswered questions.

How was any of this possible? How could Zoe be dead? Why did she die? Who attacked her and Miss Fisher. How did the police lose dead bodies? Was it incompetence? What was really going on here?

The same set of questions and ones like it roiled through Craig's head as he lost track of time and space. Thankfully, the

driver knew where he was going and soon the taxi pulled up alongside the Radisson Blu Le Metropolitan.

It took a few seconds before Craig realized the driver was turned toward him, informing him that he'd arrived. He blinked back into awareness, nodded, paid, and exited the vehicle. As the driver pulled away, Craig glanced up to take in the hotel. It was a fine specimen of architectural wonders as four-star hotels went. Only a few miles from the city center, it looked even more picturesque with the Eiffel Tower perched in the background like a painting. But Craig had no mind for it. After the tersest of glances, he headed inside through the tall, frosted-glass double doors with no interest in further examination.

Once inside, Craig scratched his thinning brown hair, fingers subconsciously pushing it back into the trained part he'd maintained as long as he could remember. The numbness dissipated in the warm glow of the lobby, with its plush high backed chairs, royal blue love seats, a small fountain and a rather modern dark wood flooring that was polished to a shine. Craig was here for answers. Surely, someone had to know something. Zoe's death couldn't go unsolved, and if that meant he needed to ask questions, that's exactly what he would do.

The pudgy architect put on an air of importance like he might do when meeting a prospective client as he approached the front desk where the clerk had a phone up to his ear. There was a moment of acknowledgment where the clerk put his hand over the phone, offered a polite smile, and said, "Good morning, monsieur. I will be with you in just a moment."

Craig nodded silently and maintained his important and impatient demeanour. He examined the young man before

him. He wore a black uniform that matched the porter, had a pencil-thin mustache, hair neatly coiffed, a thin nose and round expressive blue eyes. He had a name badge that said his name was Alexandre. From what Craig could gather from the conversation, whoever was on the line was doing their best to challenge Alexandre's patience, but to his credit, only the corners of his eyes revealed any discomfort with the exchange.

When the man hung the phone up, he turned to Craig with a warm rehearsed smile and said, "Hello monsieur. How may I help you?"

"Hi Alexandre, my name is Craig Evans," Craig said with a dark stare. "My sister, Zoe, was killed in one of your rooms and I want to find answers."

Alexandre's face blanched white. "I'm sorry," he stammered. "You want, answers?"

"Yes," Craig replied. "Can you tell me more about who accessed her room?"

Alexandre looked confused. "You are not with the police, are you? The police were given all of our video records."

"No." Craig pulled out his wallet and showed Alexandre his I.D. proving who he is. "Are there any other access logs? Records of entry? Please help me, Alexandre," he pleaded. Craig placed his hands on the counter and seemed increasingly desperate. "Someone killed my sister and I just need answers."

The clerk was visibly torn. He looked around the lobby inconspicuously then turned to Craig with a sympathetic expression. "Let me see."

"Thank you so much," Craig responded, visibly relieved that he wouldn't have to resort to more desperate measures.

Alexandre logged into the front desk computer and began typing and clicking through screens. Craig leaned forward to try and see but didn't have a good angle. He was trying to be

patient but was desperate for answers.

Alexandre noticed Craig's craning neck and took another peek around the lobby, then turned the monitor.

The hotel attendant shook his head with a frown. "See there?" Alexandre pointed at a line that read two-sixteen P.M. and spoke quietly, leaning closer to Craig. "That is the cleaning staff entering when they found them. And those," the clerk continued, pointing at a range of entries on the screen for Craig to see, "Is initial entry by the guests. Your sister," he added. "After that, there was no entry or exit until housekeeping entered."

Craig shook his head. It didn't make sense. The police had mentioned that the initial examination of the video footage showed no one except his sister and Kate Fisher entering the room at seven P.M. His expression soured. "Are there any other entrances or exits?"

"No."

Craig's shoulders slumped. This was useless. What was he, an architect doing trying to show up the police? Inept or not, the police had far more expertise in these things than he did. He let out a sigh and was about to turn away, to find a tax when an line of text at the bottom of the screen caught his attention. He pointed at the line and asked, "What's that?"

Alexandre looked at where Craig had pointed. At the bottom of the screen, there was a lone entry at 4:02AM, after the investigation closed, belongings were cleaned up and the room emptied.

4:02AM - GUEST ENTRY

Alexandre looked curiously at the screen. "The key-card used to access the room was a guest. It was one of the key-cards issued to the guests."

“Oui, monsieur?”

“My name is Craig Evans,” Craig explained impatiently, then continued, rancor evident in his voice, “My sister is Zoe Evans. The woman who was killed and then you lost her body.”

The officer, a stocky woman with a steely expression didn’t budge at Craig’s accusation. She reached over and began looking through a stack of manila folders that were overstuffed with paperwork. “Oui.” He selected one of the folders and looked through its content at a summary sheet, then placed the folder back in its original location in the stack. “Come with me, Mr. Evans.”

Craig followed through the hallway to a large room with partitions. The officer escorted him through the small maze. Of cubicles to a desk with a placard that read, Berger. “Pierre,” began the administrative officer. “This is Mr. Craig. He wants to speak to you about the Craig-Fisher case.”

A gaunt man with close-cropped blonde hair wearing a blue button-up shirt and black slacks stood up from behind the desk and reached his hand out to Craig hurriedly. “Hello, monsieur Craig, I’m detective Pierre Berger.” The detective’s body language made him seem as if he wanted to get the conversation finished before it ever started so that he could move onto more important work. Craig shook the detective’s hand and sat down as the clerk took his leave.

“I’m so sorry for what hap-”

“Have you found my sister’s body?” Craig blurted the question, wanting to skip pleasantries as much as the detective.

Detective Berger frowned. “No sir, I’m sorry. We haven’t.”

“What about other leads? Surely you have other leads.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Evans. We do not at this time,” replied the



detective.

Craig shook his head in annoyance. "A body doesn't just disappear! This is preposterous. I guess I'm the only person capable of solving my own sister's murder! So I'll give you a lead." Craig shook his head in frustration. "Someone was in my sister's hotel room after your investigation concluded - at four A.M."

Berger cocked his head and leaned forward. "What do you mean someone was in the room? How do you know this?"

Craig gave the detective a dubious look, silently wondering how the man had risen to the rank of detective. "I asked the front desk of the hotel for the entry records."

"Ah," Berger replied. "I'll have to verify that."

Craig sat back while detective Berger opened up the case file on his desk to look up the hotel number. He dialed it and spent a few minutes asking questions. Craig had a moment of Deja Vu as the detective went through roughly the same line of questioning as he had before. When Berger hung up, Craig was leaning forward in his chair, anticipating some forward motion, some new clue or path forward.

"So?"

Berger chewed on his lip as he scribbled a note, then looked up. "I'll look into it."

Craig's brow furrowed incredulously. "You'll look into it? That's it?"

"Yes. I'll review the videotapes at the specified time and see if they show who entered the room at four A.M. We've reviewed all the tapes at the time of the murder and none reveal anyone entering."

"When can I expect an update?" Craig asked.

"I'll contact you when I have any new updates, Mr. Evans. I'm sorry I don't have more information for you."

The numbness was beginning to set in again. Craig stared at the detective, feeling out of sorts. If the detective had plans of consoling Craig for his sister's death or adding confidence that he'd be prioritizing solving the case, he wasn't making those intentions known.

"There's also the matter of your sister's personal effects," explained Berger. "You can pick them up down the hall. Her wallet was missing. We believe it may have been a hotel employee, and we are tracking that down."

Craig was tired of the negligence. He was tired of the ineptitude. He just needed to sleep or eat, or just about anything else that would, and to try and figure out what to do next. He got up out of the chair and milled his way down to the hall, collecting a box of effects that he didn't have the gumption to examine further.

After he left the station, he lumbered down the sidewalk for a while with the box hanging limply in front of him, there had to be something more he could do. He still couldn't believe it.

How could Zoe be dead?

## chapter eleven

*Marc Cooper*

“GARÇON!”

Craig called the waiter for the fifth time, only this time with a touch of indignation. There were half a dozen tables outside the *Le Pré aux Clercs*, and the other five had all been waited on since Craig sat down. The waiter gave no hint of acknowledging him, so Craig was surprised when he finally came over. A rake thin man, dressed strikingly in a black waistcoat, a long white apron, and rolled up shirt sleeves, who flicked at his bow tie, with both his index finger and practiced indifference.

“Imbécile?” he said.

“What?” said Craig, moving back a little.

“Ah! You are English. I would never have known. You hide it so well.”

“Did you call me an imbecile?”

“Mais oui.”

“I don’t do foreign. Does it have another meaning in French?”

“I believe the strict translation is imbecile. But my English

is poor, so you must forgive me if the subtleties of your native tongue fly high above my elegantly coiffured head.”

The waiter’s jet-black hair was indeed full and neatly shorn, and, feeling the waiter’s gaze on his thinning pate, Craig brushed his hand over it self-consciously.

“Well,” said Craig, shuffling on his wicker chair, which creaked under his bulk, “that seems a bit rude to me.”

“But you called me *garçon*!” said the waiter with a dollop of indignation of his own.

Craig stared at the waiter in utter confusion.

“Yes, I did. What would you prefer me to call you?”

“You could say *excusez-moi* or *pardon* or, simply, monsieur. That would be quite sufficient.”

“Right, m’shoor, can I have a coffee, please?”

“Un café?”

“And not one of those tiny ones. A proper coffee.”

“A proper café. Oui, oui. Of course, monsieur.”

And with that, the waiter gracefully breezed away, clutching his tray in his white-knuckled fist.

The café sat on the corner of rues Jacob and Bonaparte, and the hustle and bustle of the passing pedestrians and the clangour of the street inveigled their way into Craig’s head until he felt it would burst. There was no space left for Zoe. And the only thing he wanted to think about right now was Zoe, which is how he found himself striding towards the Seine, with a newspaper tucked under his arm.

At the end of rue Bonaparte, a series of road crossings landed him beside the riverbank, and a little way along, at the entrance of the Pont des Arts: a broad, pedestrian-only bridge that spanned the river between the Institut de France and the Musée de Louvre. Craig made his way along the wooden planking to the middle of the bridge and sat down on one of

the long wooden benches.

There he sat, staring into the middle distance, vaguely aware of the Bateaux Mouches sliding down either side of the Île de la Cité, and the absence of the spire of Notre-Dame.

“More loss,” Craig said to himself. “More pointless loss. More beauty lost to the world. But at least it can be rebuilt.”

With space to breath and focussing on the mellifluous tones of a bass saxophone being played two benches away, Craig’s head soon cleared and his course of action was obvious.

The gendarmerie were useless. How, he had asked himself over and over, does anyone misplace a body? How can two young women be murdered in a modern city, and there be no clues to the crime or its perpetrators? If he were at home, he’d plunge into the investigation with all guns blazing; but the language hurdle in Paris was insurmountable... as was the culture... and the bureaucracy. He didn’t even know how to get started. He needed help.

The discarded newspaper he’d unknowingly picked up at the café lay on the bench beside him. Flicking through the pages of *Le Parisien*, Craig’s eyes blurred at the meaningless headlines, and raised his eyebrows at the mentions of Brexit and the picture of the hapless and hopeless Theresa May; a woman whose loss would barely cause a ripple. Then, within a densely packed page of type entitled *Annonce*, Craig’s eye was drawn inexorably, like a shark to sanguineous seawater, to an advert written in English. It read:

*Private Detective for hire. Discrete and tenacious. No job too small (or too big). Fluent English and French. Call Raymond on—*

Craig picked up his phone and dialled.

A bead of sweat trickled down Craig’s back as he mounted the

narrow and rickety staircase to the office of Louis Raymond. rue Favart was only a short walk from the rive droite, and Craig followed Raymond's directions to get there, which took him through the grand courtyard of the Louvre's Cour Carrée, and, after crossing the rue de Rivoli, through the delightful Jardin du Palais Royal, with its central pond and fountain. He arrived at rue Favart with a spring in his step and full of hope, albeit rather moistly.

A sign at the top of the stairs read: *1<sup>o</sup> étage*, and a little way down the hallway Craig found Raymond's office, indicated by a small, dull brass plaque screwed inexpertly to the wall.

The office door opened into a short hallway that led to a large reception room, which contained a shabby desk and piles of cardboard and plastic boxes stacked against the walls. Another door led off this room, and as Craig approached it, the door opened to reveal Louis Raymond, who extend his hand and introduced himself loudly:

"Mr... Ah, Craig. Louis Raymond. Delighted to meet you. Please call me Raymond. Come in. Come in."

At first sight of him, Craig's heart leapt. Raymond looked just like the waiter at *Le Pré aux Clercs*: tall, lean, short black hair, elegantly coiffured. But he calmed at the man's powerful handshake and his robust, athletic build. These were not the hands of a aluminium tray-carrying waiter. In fact, Raymond was not dissimilar to the man Craig imagined himself to be when he looked in his bedroom mirror (standing sideways and holding in his stomach): a little taller; a bit more hair; a taught, fit body. Nor was Raymond entirely dissimilar to the man Craig had found in bed with his girlfriend Jane when on holiday in Cyprus the previous year, after she feigned a migraine, and he went off to ogle Roman mosaics and returned earlier than expected. It was something else to put

out of his mind at this difficult time.

Raymond pulled up a cheap, orange office chair for Craig, and then sat down himself at his desk. Behind Raymond, the windows looked out across the street and into the building opposite. They were of the type peculiar to France that start a step above the floor and don't quite reach the ceiling: French windows, in fact.

Through one of these windows, Craig could see an old man, dressed smartly in a suit two sizes too big for his wizened frame, playing at a grand piano; his eyes, through thick, round, wire-framed spectacles, were fixed firmly ahead. Through the other window, danced a dozen or so young women in flimsy leotards, stretching and bending into impossible shapes. It seemed an inopportune moment to discuss death.

"I see you've figured out why I chose this office?" said Raymond, and he gave one of those blokeish laughs reserved for man-to-man moments that Craig loathed.

Of course, Craig understood the allure of almost-naked young women displaying themselves, but it wasn't something he chose to act upon, while Raymond was making it clear that he did. Perhaps that was the reason for the dilapidated grey couch in the corner. Perhaps that was the reason for what happened in Cyprus.

"Your accent is odd," said Craig. "Are you French?"

The question seemed to puzzle Raymond, which pleased Craig, because if he had learned one thing from the British government's Brexit negotiations it was that you should always keep the other side off balance. At some point, he and Raymond would have to agree terms, and now Craig believed he had the upper hand.

"Canadian, actually," said Raymond.

"Aren't Canadians French?"

“You’re thinking of the Québécois.”

“And they’re French?”

“French Canadian.”

“How can you be both?”

“Well, they’re people who live in the Quebec province of Canada who speak French.”

“Why don’t they speak English?”

“They can. They speak both. I believe that’s true.”

“How very odd,” said Craig, looking somewhat unconvinced.

“But I’m from Vancouver,” said Raymond, “which is over the other side of Canada.”

“And you speak French.”

“Like a native. Well, the Parisians quibble from time to time, but that’s just the way they are. Anyway, how can I help you?”

“English Welsh. Scots English. What a thought. I’m glad we have everything sorted out in Britain. With everything in its place.”

“So I hear. Now...”

Craig interrupted, speaking rapidly, “My sister has been murdered.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Raymond said sympathetically.

Craig looked up sharply and squinted across the table.

“How did you know that?” he said.

“I’m sorry. You’ve lost me.”

“How did you know she was lost.”

“You said she was dead.”

“She is. Dead and lost.”

Raymond pushed at the arms of his chair to adjust himself.

“It’s a figure of speech,” he said. “Sorry for your loss. It means: sorry that someone close to you died. Have you never



heard that before?”

“I don’t do foreign speak. There’s no need. If everyone spoke English, and spoke it properly...”

“The way you do?”

“The way I do... then these confusions wouldn’t occur.”

By now, Raymond’s face had lost its earlier bonhomie.

“Let’s start again,” said Raymond. “I’ll just keep quiet. You sister has been murdered.”

“That’s right. Zoe and her friend, Kate, came to Paris for a weekend break. They were both murdered. I’m surprised you haven’t heard about it. Are double murders of tourists common in Paris?”

Raymond remained silent and waved his hand for Craig to continue.

“Their bodies were taken to the morgue, and I was asked to come to Paris to identify Zoe’s body. When I got here, Zoe’s body was missing from the morgue. Kate body is still there. I’ve spoken to the police, and they say they have no idea who committed the murders, nor who removed the body from the morgue, nor do they have any leads. I’ve come to you to ask for help with finding my sister’s body and her murderer.”

“No,” said Raymond, firmly, shaking his head.

Craig was crestfallen. “No?”

“This type of case would take all of my time and could be very lengthy, especially the court cases that follow. I don’t have time for that. I’m sorry, but that’s my final word.”

Craig leaned forward, blinking, shaking his head in small, rapid movements.

“I have money. And so does Zoe ... did Zoe ... which I’ll inherit. I can pay you.”

“I said no, and no is my final word, Mr... Mr Evans.”

Raymond came up beside Craig and took hold of his arm.

Craig stood up beside him.

“So, you do know the case?” Craig said.

“Of course, I know. But there is nothing more to say, and I must ask you to leave.”

Raymond was gently manoeuvring Craig through the door. Craig did not resist.

“But where... where will I go?”

“Go back to the police, Mr Evans, and ask them for assistance.”

Raymond withdrew to his office and shut the door behind him.

Craig stood staring after him for a minute, crushed and demoralised, and then he turned and headed down the hallway.

Halfway down the stairs, he met two of the young women from the dance class coming up. They squeezed past him, smelling sweetly of scented soap; the heat of their bodies, warm and sensual; their movements efficient and precise; their chatter lively and secretive. One day, you’ll lie cold and stiff in a morgue, Craig thought to cry after them; but they were already inside Louis Raymond’s office, in a world Craig did not understand.

## chapter twelve

*Daniël Garcia*

CRACKLE AND POP, JUST like the cereal, went Louis Raymond's neck as he leaned back into his chair and stretched. It felt like he had spent hours staring down at the monitor of his old computer. A glance at the clock confirmed his suspicion. It was already late afternoon.

"If only you were a bit faster my old friend." He gave the small PC tower an ironic pat on the top that whirled up a light layer of dust. It was just good enough to run the latest Windows OS, but struggled as soon as Louis ran more than one program. A friend of his had suggested putting a Linux or something on it to make it run faster. "You're still good enough for me. No, need to hurry a careful investigation." Although, looking at his old couch he would have liked to lie down with one of those smaller Macs, but the new models only had these new connections, and he definitely did not feel like having to buy new cables for all of his stuff.

Turning back towards his desk he slid his finger against the LCD screen. The faint smear left by his finger traced a light circle around a location he had found on the map. The

location was roughly 30 minutes away. He could even take the bus.

Before going to the next step Louis did what others found confusing. He lay down on his old couch and closed his eyes. He wasn't sleeping, the couch was too uncomfortable to sleep, but comfortable enough to let him think and stay focused. Louis reviewed the clues and information he had researched.

"It's gotta be someone that's not missed during the day or has a good excuse to only be up at night." He liked speaking his thoughts out loud. It helped him decide if something made sense or seemed too far fetched. People that saw him like this felt uncomfortable, it was one reason he couldn't find a good receptionist.

"Vampires are real." Still can't believe I'm doing this, he thought. "Some have got to make a living." He figured not every vampire was a rich noble, even Ms. Evans had to work. "Somewhere where they're not noticed. An occupation that works at night." He had figured a night guard or a projectionist, but those were too closely watched by their paranoid employers or belatedly of fashion. "If I had to suck blood, I wouldn't want to be in the same place for too long." It just made sense to keep moving from place to place. Once a victim turns up in the news, it was a sure bet that more media hounds would follow. "Especially now that every kid with a smartphone can post 'news'."

His inquiries with various contacts at local police stations throughout Paris had turned up empty. Louis' research had then led him to check the newspaper archives for any deaths related to blood loss or other strange circumstances. He had to go back several decades before he found a significant number of cases. Out of context they seemed random. Spread throughout Paris. As the decades came closer to the 21st

century they became less frequent and less spread out. Some cases appeared months apart.

Louis yawned out loud. It had taken long hours reading through decades worth of articles until he had found what seemed to be a definite pattern linked to a predictable occurrence. "It sounds like a cheap horror movie, but it fits. It's got to be it!" He felt sure beyond a doubt. Now all he had to do was call Zoe Evans. Louis did not relish the thought of going alone to interview a vampire.

Looking back at the screen from the couch Louis Raymond stared at the location marked on his map. The Cirque Phénix. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"Couldn't we have taken a taxi or rented a car to go to the circus?" asked Zoe.

"Don't you care about climate change? Besides the it's cheaper and no one rents a car for an half hour drive."

Zoe made an effort not to roll her eyes. She glanced through the window. Away from central Paris with it's unique French atmosphere, the roads looked just like the roads of any other country. The grey, dreary rooftop landscape she had seen all around the world rushed by. The bus itself was barely half full. She and Raymond had taken the empty back seats. No other passengers were near them. "Are you sure about this? Whoever heard of a vampire running away with the circus."

"Know many vampires now?" Raymond chuckled to himself. "It might just be hunch, a damn good one though."

"How did you figure that out?" Zoe listened intently. Raymond's Canadian accent was so unlike what movies had told her to expect that she was waiting for something funny to come out of his mouth.

"When you told me you were a vampire I noticed you didn't have a shadow. Didn't know that one myself, but I figured something like that might start to get noticed by people. So I looked for places where there were enough distractions to draw away attention from a missing shadow."

"And naturally you came up with the circus." Zoe's intonation was doubtful. It seemed like a huge jump in logic to her.

"Of course not." Raymond described to her in short how he cross referenced the newspaper reports. "I figured the circus gives enough distraction and mobility to remain unseen in the public." He pulled out a small pamphlet. "Besides, this kind of made me curious." He pointed to an illustration of a dark figure wearing glow in the dark paint juggling various items lit by electric light. "Calls himself Jugglio, the Dark Wanderer."

Zoe almost bit her lip.

At dusk and a little over half an hour later the bus arrived at a bus-stop near the park Bois de Vincennes. The tent of the Cirque Phénix stood tall and proud. Decorated in crimson and gold it reminded Zoe of opulent Chinese costumes she had seen during Lunar New Years festivals. The area was bustling with more people than she had thought were interested in circuses. A number of French clowns walked amongst the crowd, lights illuminated the immediate area as if it were day. Zoe sniffed the familiar scent of carnival festivities, cinnamon, roasted, almonds, sugar, and candied apples. She caught herself in a childhood memory. Tempted to run to the nearest vendor to splurge her pocket money for candied apples and têtes choco, she snapped herself out of it. "Let's go get our tickets."

"Don't you want some sweets?" Raymond stood next to

her, mouth full of sweet cream and chocolate, holding a bag filled with coconut, mocha, and semi-sweet têtes choco.

Louis was enthralled by the performances, at least for those that weren't done by a supposed vampire. Ms. Evans on the other hand did not seem to enjoy the shows as much as he. As Jugglio's performance started Louis returned to his more serious demeanour. The lights inside the tent went out, the embrace of darkness enveloped the audience. Louis heard faint shudders around him. What came next wasn't necessarily the most spectacular show he had ever seen, if it had been in broad daylight.

Stepping into the central was a figure dressed in black, with wild designs painted in glowing colours. Strips of vibrant blue, red, green ran along the body, gaps left between the strips were filled with the black void of darkness. Jugglio presented himself as an otherworldly being. The clubs and balls he threw into the air were barely recognisable as such. Some had strips of glowing colour, other were lit by internal electric lights. The juggling was not the spectacle, it was the light show that presented itself as glowing streaks raced vertically, then suddenly horizontally. The afterglow left the eye with an impression of solid lines forming landscapes and figures.

Louis felt as if he saw a story hidden in the rapid lights streaking across his vision. Fifteen minutes later the performance ended with the blinding light of the floodlights, the entire tent was brightly lit. Blinking through the slight pain in his eyes Louis saw the dark clad figure bowing before the half blind audience and silently exiting. He wondered if the lack of shadows was due to the bright lights or what he saw was true. The roaring applause almost drowned out the voice of Ms. Evans beside him. "Let's go out and meet him!"

Louis nodded and led the way outside as the next performance was being set up. Ms Evans put on her gloves as she exited the warm tent. A few inquiries later they found the trailer wagon of Jugglio, the Dark Wanderer. The lit windows were a sure sign that he was in.

Louis turned round to Zoe Evans. "How do you want to do this Ms. Evans? I hope you have a list of questions that don't start with 'Are you a vampire?'"

"Sure," she replied. "Perhaps we should knock first." Louis nodded and took the first step as he gently knocked on the door.

A muffled 'moment' later and the door opened. A tanned and fairly British looking man greeted them. "What can I do for you?" The voice was calm, tinged with an accent that reminded him of every Bollywood movie his ex had loved to watch. The man wore several rings on his fingers and necklaces dangled from his bare chest.

"Are you Jugglio?"

"Says so on the side, doesn't it?" He opened the door further and motioned them inside. "Not much use standing out here in the cold. Come on in."

The interior is surprisingly warm, thought Louis. He noted the bright electric light and various knick-knacks around the room. Also the bedmat spread out on a larger than normal trunk. "We apologise for the unannounced visit Mr. Jugglio."

The man held up a hand. "Please, call me Jean. Jean Trevelyan."

Louis coughed. "Thank you, Mr. Trevelyan. Jean, We'd like to ask some questions. Rather Ms. Evans would like to ask some as part of her research topic."

Jean looked at them both rather confused. "I'm not sure how I could help you. We're just circus performers. I'm sure



there are plenty of books on that topic."

Ms. Evans stepped in front of Louis. "I just want to confirm some things that are written in the books. To make sure they're not exaggerated or untrue."

Jean's expression remained unchanged. "What exactly is your research topic?"

"You're a vampire, aren't you?" Ms. Evans stood as if daring him to move her from the spot. Louis had a coughing fit.

Jean looked from Evans to Louis and back. A smile slid across his lips. The kind of smile that said: "You show me yours, I'll show you mine." He broadened his smile into a grin. "Well, child. I was wondering why I felt your presence in the audience. The stench of fresh blood hangs around you like a gnat in Delhi." Without turning his back Jean sat himself into a large chair. "What do you really want?" An expectant look was on his face.

"Just questions, really. Where are you from? Is it all true? All these things about vampires? Crosses, water, fire, sunlight. All of that." Zoe Evans looked defiant, but a slight tremble in her voice betrayed her nervousness.

The vampire Trevelyan looked at her for a few moments. "As to my person. I was born and raised in Calcutta. There I became what I am. These flaws you speak of are common knowledge. Everybody knows that. Just avoid visiting churches during the day." His face betrayed no emotion.

"But are they true?" Ms. Evans loosened her stance. "I've run through the rain, the water doesn't do anything..."

"You're not supposed to stand in rivers, child. Rain is not a river." Trevelyan's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to joke with me?"

"No, I'm just confused and unsure of some things. I don't

have anyone else to turn to."

Trevelyan took in a deep breath. "Avoid these things and you'll be fine."

"What about fire?"

"Don't burn yourself."

"Can you you shapeshift? Turn into a wolf or bat?"

"I am not as old as some others that may have this gift. I'm sure it will come in time as we grow." Trevelyan held out a hand as if to silence her. "Along with flying and sparkling. Stay away from churches, stay away from rivers, and stay away from obsessive fanatics." At the last part he gave her a hard look. "If you're so obsessed about these things, perhaps you should seek an elder vampire." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "If you can find him, seek out the one who found me when I hunted in Calcutta, George Gordon. He is the oldest vampire I know. I'm sure he'll be more open to your questions."

Louis noted how Ms. Evan's expression sunk to the floor. "Is that all? Just stay away from everything and everyone?"

Trevelyan rose and leaned in closer to her face. "I do what I can to survive, child. That includes not tempting fate. I take great pains not to get caught when I hunger, and that entails staying away from potential dangers. Especially when pop culture lets everybody know our weaknesses."

"But you're wearing jewellery. So silver doesn't have any effect?"

The vampire's hand went to his necklaces. "These are stainless steel." He wiggled his fingers in front of Zoe. "And these are tungsten carbide in case you were wondering." The shiny rings reflected the electric light into her eyes.

Suddenly, before Louis had a chance to react, he saw Ms. Evans thrust her gloved hand out towards Trevelyan's chest. The scream pierced his skull like a hot knife through buttered

toast on a rainy day.

Zoe was caught by surprise. She had expected the vampire Trevelyan to yell at her, although she was reasonably sure he wouldn't suddenly burst into flames. Reasonably. He didn't combust, but his yell of pain was more than she had bargained with as she pushed the small silver ring in her gloved hand against his bare chest.

The calm, overbearing expression Trevelyan had worn flashed away as an audible hiss emanated from his chest. "You little bitch!" She felt a sudden pain as her hand was knocked away with unexpected force. Before she knew it she felt herself pressed against the wall.

"What is wrong with you!" hissed Trevelyan. "You'll pay for that!"

Zoe suddenly felt a hand on her neck. The mad eyes of Trevelyan bore into the back of her skull as his other hand fumbled in a drawer beside her. Even with her strength she felt as if pushing against a stone wall. Zoe's eyes widened as she saw the pile of wooden stakes lying in the drawer. Her eyes were glued to the sharpened wooden tip as Trevelyan slowly lifted it towards her chest.

"You're not the first one of our kind I've had to kill." His mouth was only a few centimetres away from her face. "Our kind can be hard to kill by ourselves, that's why I've prepared these just in case." A wicked grin spread on his face. "Break in case of glass, huh?"

Trevelyan drew his arm back for the deadly strike, then screamed again and fell silent. The colour in his face quickly faded, his eyes grew pale. A spittle of blood began to drip from the corner of his mouth. With a thud he fell to his knees and toppled over.

Standing over the now lifeless corpse stood Raymond, his hands covered in dark blood as they slid from the wooden stake protruding from Trevelyan's back. "Don't leave your drawers open."

Zoe looked wide eyed at Raymond. "Oh, shit. What are we gonna do now?"

Before she could think further Zoe felt the strong tug from Raymond's hand as he dragged her out of the wagon. "Let's get the hell out of here before anyone shows up!"

## chapter thirteen

*Waleed Ovasse*

RAYMOND FUMBLER IN THE pockets of his coat, trying to find a lighter. He stood in the middle of his office, the bare receptionist's desk a not so gentle reminder of his own solitude. He always kept at least one lighter in his coat, but nonetheless, he always seemed to lose them one by one. The lady at the corner store, a teenager he truly believed was judging his spending, didn't understand why he kept purchasing lighters in packs of five. He gave up and turned back towards the open door of his office.

His desk was littered with papers, newsprints, and even printouts from online forums regarding vampire sightings. Everyone and their mother seemed to have an opinion to share, and the darkest reaches of the internet seemed more interested in killing vampires and sharing the gory details. He had compiled enough footage from random posts online to run continuously for a solid 24 hours. Most of them were boring: dull and grainy footage of something possibly moving in the background. Others were more interesting: levitating cups and even household tasks that seemed to be done with

no one in the room.

Which made the entire thing even more frustrating. How do you track anyone, actually find anyone, if they're basically invisible? And even that was a big if. Every story, every encounter, every dream of vampires was slightly different. And no one knew the truth. He grunted in frustration, moving the papers around, trying to find a lighter. He finally tore open his bottom drawer and removed a new, plastic wrapped, case of five. Just more to lose, he thought, as he turned around and walked towards the Rue.

A light drizzle coated the streets and covered the lamps in small beads. He cupped his hand around his cigarette and lit it quickly before it became too damp. He didn't enjoy taking cases like this, if only because they were too close to civil disputes. Missing persons, while hot and sexy television fodder, seemed to involve too many tears and too much family. Sometimes it was best to move on, and let things go. But, Ms. Evans' money was just as good as everyone else's. And she did seem to have a lot of it. This case would keep him going for a while.

He hadn't chosen his office location with anything in mind. It was a space to conduct business affairs, and it was near enough to any amenities he might need. But as the drizzle turned into a more persistent rain, he was reminded of its beauty. The pale yellow lamplight above *Les Noces de Jeanette* was brighter than normal in the rain. He shuffled back into the doorway, wrapping his jacket tighter around himself. He chastised himself. In Paris, there always answers, and endless possibilities, he thought. He flicked the butt into street and went inside, a plume of smoke wafting behind him.

He took out his phone as he shuffled through the papers on his desk. He had requested a favor from an old friend,

Jacque Berger, about information from a missing persons case they had worked together years ago. In that case, they had found the missing father, but not before watching the family dynamics unravel before their eyes as everyone came to terms with the possibility of their father's death. One of the family members, Sarah, still kept in touch with Jacque. She had been more into the occult, the life under the streets of Paris, and perhaps she might have some answers.

Anything was possible, he reminded himself, as he dialed her phone number. The telltale continuous ring of a landline continued for several minutes. There was no proper etiquette he could think of, so he let the phone ring until a groggy, but delicately feminine voice answered the phone. "Good evening Madame Sarah, by name is Raymond, and I hope you remember me from the unfortunate mess with your father a few years ago."

"Of course I remember you sir," she replied, her voice gaining strength as she woke up. "I was very happy to hear from Jacque that you wanted my help in some way. After the situation with my father, I have felt that I owe both of you more than just money."

"Yes madame. I won't take up too much of your time or anything. I apologize for waking you up. I was hoping you might lead me in the right direction concerning something. Well. I suppose of the occult nature."

"And why do you believe I would know anything about the occult?"

"You had mentioned a passing interest a few years ago."

"Passing, yes," she replied sharply. He could tell that she was immediately getting defensive. The conversation could end abruptly if he wasn't careful.

"Perhaps you were the wrong person to ask," he said. "I

apologize for taking your time.”

“Raymond! I didn’t say that. However, answers depend on what information you’re seeking. And most importantly, why?”

Raymond grabbed a piece of paper from his desk: a newsprint he had found online from years ago, detailing the shady dealings of an occult figurehead in the Paris underground by the name of George Gordon. He had, had so few leads, that this might as well be somewhere to start. There were no known pictures of George, and every account online that even spoke of him seemed to be asking more questions. “I’m currently working on a case, madame. And I need more information regarding a topic that perhaps to most in Paris doesn’t even exist.”

“Please be specific Raymond.”

“Vampires, Sarah. I’m working on a case about vampires.” He was met with a silence from the other end of the phone. The slow exhale of breath at least meant she hadn’t hung up.

“And what do you want to know?”

“If they are real, I would like more information about them. The only name in Paris I was able to track down is a... George...Gordon? Does that name ring any bells with you?”

“Mister Raymond, I cannot speak openly about this.”

“But you know of the man I’m asking about?” His heart leapt into his chest. There was finally a true lead. He might be able to meet someone to ask questions! And every now and again, questions lead to answers.

“I have heard of this man, yes.”

“Can you give me anything more?”

“There is very little that I can give of this man, sir.”

“Do you know of a way to contact him?”

Sarah sighed. “I have heard if you contact the Pere Lachaise Cemetery, they may be able to help. But that is all



that I can say. There is no more.”

He quickly scribbled the name down. “I respect that, Madame. Thank you for your time.”

“Goodbye sir. And please tell no one of this conversation. I consider my debt regarding my father to now be repaid.”

She hung up the phone, leaving Raymond to stare at the note he scribbled. There was finally a lead, even if it was a cemetery. He didn’t enjoy hanging around cemeteries, but it was a beginning. A quick search brought up the phone number, and he was once again on the phone. The familiar ringing of a landline kept going until finally an answering machine picked up. “Thank you for calling the Pere Lachaise Cemetery. We are not currently accepting appointments of any kind. Please call back during regular business hours, if we may be able to assist you further. You may leave a voice message.”

As quickly as there was a lead, there was another dead end, he thought, but decided to leave a voicemail. “Hello, my name is Louis Raymond and I am a private investigator. I am trying to locate a Mister George Gordon. I have heard that your establishment may have knowledge of this gentleman. Thank you for your time.”

He sighed and sat back in his chair. There was nothing to do but wait, and work on other leads. He ran his hands over the papers on his desk, and then glanced at his email. But where to start?

Paris was generally beautiful in the morning, Raymond thought. But after a rainstorm, he was in love. The sun broke through the clouds in shafts of light as it made its climb above the buildings, rising slowly into the sky. He held a hot cup of coffee in his hand, the steam rising in tendrils to meet his lit cigarette. The walk from his apartment to his office was a

peaceful one in the morning. He had slept better knowing that he was closer to answers, and awoken feeling reading to take on the world and solve the case.

He arrived at his office entrance and peeked into the mailbox: nothing. He reached for his keys, but realized that his door was already ajar. He sipped his coffee, his heart dropping, as he realized the extent of the damage. The door jamb was splintered, and the door knob was hanging loosely. They hadn't bothered to hide their handiwork. They wanted him to know that they were interested in getting in. He flicked his butt into the street and gingerly walked inside.

His papers were strewn over the floor, marking a trail of debris towards his office. His filing cabinets had been emptied and thrown in every direction. His desk drawers were on the floor, upside down. And while his computer had been smashed, they had seemingly removed his hard drive. It was both a mess, and a carefully executed manoeuvre. They had wanted something from him.

"Merde," he muttered. He looked towards the ceiling. He had installed two cameras that covered the entire room. Thankfully they were still there. He took out his phone and opened the app that recorded the cameras. Hopefully, he would be able to figure out who did this. To add insult to injury, they had slashed the cushions of his desk chair. He sighed, sat on the floor, and watched the footage at ten times speed.

He finished his coffee and threw the cup across the room. There wasn't much to see in the footage: not at ten times speed, not at half speed. There were no faces, there were no bodies. The room seemed to destroy itself. The papers seemed to exit the filing cabinets in bunches and then were thrown, but there was no one there. The computer hard drive was

carefully extracted by invisible hands. He zoomed in, trying to catch a glimpse of anything, but there wasn't even a shadow out of place. To add insult to injury, he even watched as dozens of his lost lighters were tested, the flame flickering momentarily, and then disappear, never to be seen again.

He got up off the floor, his back aching in protest, and walked outside, immediately lighting a cigarette. The possibilities for this intrusion were limited. Sarah wasn't the type to destroy people's property, and while he had enemies, most weren't the violent type, or they were in jail. And the footage confirmed much of what he had researched. They don't show up on digital footage. Their pictures don't exist. And he had tried to get into contact with someone who was possibly more powerful than he understood.

He exhaled, letting the smoke slowly curl from his nose. He let his realization sink in: he had been targeted by vampires. They were real. And, trying to find George Gordon had led to a quick 'inspection,' on who was trying to locate him.

Raymond had wanted a lead. And now he had one.

Or perhaps he was a target now.

## chapter fourteen

*Dan Hallberg*

IF RAYMOND HAD TO put an adjective to his current feelings it would be “impatient.”

Raymond was more of an action guy when it came to his work. A lead would come in, or a new question would pop up and he would follow up immediately. Sure, there were times where following a lead meant sitting in a car for a few hours watching a window or fence gate for the slightest sign of movement, but in those instances, even though he was ostensibly doing nothing, he was following a lead; which meant forward motion; which meant taking action.

So the idea that a man whose advertisements boasted “35 years of experience in the security field,” would spend 14 minutes silently staring at an obviously kicked in deadbolt lock, made Raymond feel impatient. “What could he possibly be thinking about?” Raymond thought as he tapped his foot and chewed on his right thumbnail.

Finally, this wise sage of a locksmith spoke up--and in a thick Meridional accent proclaimed, “Looks like someone kicked your door in.”

An exasperated Raymond managed to muster a reply without strangling the man, “Yes, I’m aware. Could you please replace it with something a bit more sturdy.”

“I’ve got a heavy duty unit in my truck that will be nice and sturdy. Far better than the junk those punks kicked in,” the locksmith drawled, “but be warned, sturdiness takes time, and time is money my friend.”

Money he had, which satisfied the locksmith enough for him to venture out to his truck for equipment, but as for time...Raymond was unsure. The Evans girl had brought trouble to his doorstep that he had never encountered before. Raymond knew he needed to do something, but seeing as the supernatural was new territory, he didn’t know what. He had no real leads. He knew George Gordon was involved, but had no real thoughts on motive. He couldn’t possibly understand the motivations of a species he didn’t know existed up until yesterday.

Raymond rubbed his eyes and sat down on his sofa and tried to think. Unfortunately, it seemed that the cost of sturdy also included noise pollution. After about ten minutes of listening to the odd combinations of sounds that are apparently par for the course for a senior citizen in the locksmithing profession, Raymond decided to get proactive. He informed the locksmith that he would be going out for a while.

Raymond walked down the narrow hallway separating his office from the reception area. Once Raymond reached his non existent employee’s desk, he took the sign which read “Out to lunch, go right in to Mr. Raymond” in both French and English and flipped it over so that it read “Out to lunch, come back later.” That sign was the most reliable assistant he’d ever had.

Raymond was no expert on real life vampires, but he had certainly encountered a good deal of fictional ones. Over his time as an investigator, Raymond had learned that he could never trust information from one narrator, even if said narrator seemed on the up and up. However, if two incongruous narrators, completely independently recount the same information, then that was a lead that warranted following. With that he figured that if he could think of two separate works of fiction that recounted a trait in vampires, he was going to treat that as a fact for protection purposes.

Unfortunately for Raymond, by virtue of the feature films being filmed in his home town and a weekend with a woman of “Netflix and chill”-ing that contained far more “Netflix” than he would’ve preferred, he knew more about the vampires of *Twilight* than he would like. As a child he was a fan of the Castlevania game on his Sega, and he had at the very least seen a number of film iterations of Dracula to get the basics on vampires. After about ten minutes of walking, he had come up with a list of items that would, at the very least, make him feel like he had taken every reasonable precaution should a group of nightwalkers kick in his door again.

First stop was the corner market, where he picked up two heads of garlic and stuffed them in his jacket pocket with his credit card. Raymond was pretty sure this one was bullshit, but it was going to be by far the cheapest precaution he could take.

Past the Opéra Comique, and three streets over from his office on the Rue Favart was an antique shop Raymond liked to frequent. Though he rarely bought anything, Raymond did enjoy the oddities that often made their way through the shop and the conversations he’d have with the shop’s proprietor, Arthur. Raymond liked hearing about the cavalcade of characters that frequent an antique shop in a theatre district

and Arthur liked mocking the Canadian twang on Raymond's French.

"Ah Raymond, good to see you!" Arthur beamed and motioned to the remainder of what looked to be his breakfast, "Can I offer you a palmier? I know our humble pastries cannot compare to your Tim Hortons, but we do so try to keep up with your national delicacies."

Raymond couldn't help but smirk at the old man's condescension and gratefully ate the pastry. He realized that he hadn't eaten anything since the break in and he was famished.

"You're right Art," Raymond said, purposefully dumbing down his French for comedic effect, "this can't hold a candle to a fresh timbit."

Raymond devoured the palmier, finishing just as Arthur appeared and provided him with a hot cup of black coffee, "what brings you in young man? It's a bit early for you to be out and about with the hours you keep for your job."

"Just had to get an early start on something for a new case," Raymond replied, "needed to get out and get some supplies."

Arthur looked at Raymond quizzically, "I don't know what kind of supplies I have to offer a man in your profession, but by all means look around. Baskets are by the door, etcetera, etcetera," Arthur stood, "I got to go take a shit. Black coffee and 75 years of life well lived don't often agree with each other."

Raymond grabbed a basket and began lurking around the antique store floor. He could barely squeeze his broad shoulders through the tightly packed shelves, and more than once had to duck as he went through doorways. After digging around a few minutes Raymond managed to find a few crosses suitable for hanging on his wall, as well as a few old sets of

rosary beads to keep around his office in case he should need to act quick.

Supposedly vampires can't see themselves in mirrors, but he already had a portrait size mirror behind his "assistant" that could be moved into his office, so that was taken care of. There was a lot written about wooden stakes to the heart, but it's not like that is the sort of thing one finds lying around. Raymond remembered seeing an old tent set once when he had stopped in a few weeks ago, but when he finally found it again, the stakes were aluminum not wood. He still added the stake bag to his basket just in case.

Raymond heard a flush on the other side of the shop and took his finds up to the counter. Arthur gave the items a look over and raised an eyebrow at Raymond, "You backpacking in the Vatican?"

"Let's just say I might have some guests coming that could use a little bit of the Lord in their lives," Raymond replied.

Arthur knew Raymond to be a lapse Catholic but decided to not push the subject any further as religion was never a pleasant thing to discuss without wine. Raymond took a look down in the glass counter case containing jewellery and other small valuables that would otherwise be easy to slip in a pocket and walk out with, "hey Art, are any of these real silver?"

"Some yeah," Arthur replied, "why, do you have a girl now you need to get some jewelry for?"

Raymond rolled his eyes, "Oh boy do I have a girl right now," he exclaimed, "anyway, let me see anything you have that's silver."

Arthur started pulling items out of the case and placing them on the counter. Some jewelry, some old solid silver five francs coins and a few DuPont lighters. Raymond reached into his pocket to pull out his credit card and as he did, one of the



garlic bulbs fell out on the floor.

“Wow Raymond, I’ve never seen you fumble anything. You must have it bad for this gi-,” Arthur suddenly cut himself off as he looked at all the items, along with Raymond’s garlic spread out on his counter. Arthur’s normally jovial expression suddenly became very serious.

“Wait here Raymond, I have one more silver item.” Arthur went to the back office and emerged with a rectangular instrument case. Arthur moved the other items into a bag and set them aside as he placed the case on the counter and opened it. Inside was a gold saxophone.

“This Raymond, is a gold plated Modele 22 alto saxophone made by Henri Selmer in 1923,” Arthur said this with a tone of reverence in his voice. Raymond knew nothing about musical instruments at all, but he could tell that that name meant something.

“That’s great Raymond, it’s beautiful, but it’s also-”

“Gold? Gold plated to be exact, not that gold lacquer you see on most brass instruments, real gold.” interrupted Arthur.

“Right...” Raymond said confused.

“You see, I sold this instrument to a young musician, must have been thirty years ago. He was quite the player, I went and saw him in the clubs. An old instrument like this needs to be tamed in order to play in tune, and only a skilled player will truly get the full potential from it. A masterfully made instrument that must be played by a master musician, and this young man was a master musician. I swear to you, when he played “La Vie en Rose,” I wept it was so beautiful.” Arthur looked down, hiding his eyes from Raymond for a second, before collecting himself and continuing.

“With all the late night gigs, there was always the danger of him getting jumped and one night he was attacked by a man. I

saw him at the bar later that night and he told us all about what happened. He told me ‘Nothing stolen, though he scratched me good behind the ear. Just some nut on drugs. You should have seen this guy, you would’ve thought the sax was made of razor blades the way he acted when he tried to grab it, but he didn’t take it.’ The young man seemed fine but he said he was going to get some sleep. The next evening he came into my shop I thought he was wearing make up he was so pale.”

“That’s aw-” Raymond didn’t get to finish his sentence before Arthur jumped back in.

“He nearly threw this case at me and yelled that he needed it away from him. That it was hurting him. I asked him what was wrong with him but he wouldn’t say. I tried to hand it to him and he nearly slapped it out of my hands. He acted like I was chasing him with a branding iron. He just kept scratching the back of his neck and begged me to take the instrument so that he didn’t have to destroy it. Thirty years...I think about that night often, and I haven’t been able to bring myself to put this beautiful horn out for sale, even in lean years.”

Arthur closed the case and latched it. He put the rest of Raymond’s items on the case.

“What my friend,” Arthur’s voice cracked, “didn’t know is that you can’t plate gold directly to raw brass, it won’t stick. So when craftsmen like Selmer gold plate a horn, they first apply a thin layer of silver, so that the gold has something to stick to,” Arthur slid the case and the items over to Raymond, “Seemed that whatever ‘affliction’ that the attacker had, had been passed on to my friend.”

Arthur peered up at Raymond, “I don’t know who this girl is or what you’re dealing with Louis,” Raymond was surprised to hear his first name from Arthur; it was down right parental,

“but if you need to fight off someone with the disease these poor young men had, it might come in handy having a perfectly camouflaged club of silver handy. Be safe please.”

After a quick stop at home, Raymond made his way back to his office. Luckily the locksmith had finished his work and, at the very least for now, a brand new deadbolt was between Raymond and the damned.

Raymond set to work preparing as best as he could for any potential vampirism that could come his way. The north, east and west walls all had crosses on them now. His couch, which was worth approximate €2.50 just ten minutes before was now crammed with solid silver francs, and every end table had either a silver lighter and or a rosary. Moving the mirror from behind his assistant’s desk to behind his own was a pain in the ass but it got done.

As a final touch, Raymond had collected the copy of the Roman Missal he had from his days at Vancouver College. He had stolen it from the school Chaplain on his last day as a memento, but he never thought he’d actually use it.

Raymond went down the hall to retrieve a basin of water from the bathroom and carefully placed it on the coffee table by his couch. He opened Missal to the the rite for Holy Water blessing, and performed it himself. Raymond was fairly certain a priest needed to perform the rite for the Catholics to call it holy water, but he hoped that the vampires weren’t as picky.

Raymond had no idea what to do with the saxophone. He opened the case on his desk and pulled out the horn. It really was beautiful. On the side of the bell, Henri Selmer’s signature had been engraved, and it was surrounded by intricate floral carvings. He leaned back in his chair with his legs on the desk holding it, thinking of Arthur’s friend and wonder about his

fate. Raymond had absolutely no idea how to play saxophone, but he did feel an odd comfort holding it and feeling the key pearls under his fingers. He was mindlessly pressing the keys when there was a knock on the door, and three figures walked in. It was at this point that Raymond realized he should have put the mirror on one of the side walls.

“It’s open,” Raymond said, and in walked, in his professional opinion, trouble. The first was a tall drink of water. Raymond was 6’2” and this guy had a solid half foot on him. Though he looked about 10 years older than him, it was Raymond’s assertion that this guy had not lost a step. His leather jacket was conspicuously marred, indicating a penchant for some violent physical activity.

His two companions were less intimidating from a size standpoint, but still looked like they could handle themselves. The first was a lean blonde, maybe 35. She was five feet of fury, and Raymond thought she would probably have been precisely his type if she didn’t also look like she would kill him if he didn’t keep her in his eye line at all times. In reality though, that was precisely the quality that made her his type. Third was a cold fish. Maybe 5’8”, 130 lbs soaking wet, glasses, slicked back hair. He didn’t seem interested in anything at all, and was wandering around Raymond’s office mindlessly. That made Raymond anxious.

“Can I help you?” Raymond asked, taking his legs off his desk.

“I do not know yet, but we shall see, perhaps we will help you,” the tall drink of water said, responding to Raymond’s French in English. It seemed like a bit of a power move. This guy wanted Raymond to know that he knew more about Raymond than Raymond knew about him, “that’s a beautiful instrument by the way,” said the tall man, nodding towards the

sax, "I'm partial to the vintage American horns myself, but the french do make an elegant instrument."

"Oh," Raymond sputtered, he had almost forgotten he was holding it. He looked down at the horn, then up to the talk drink of water, "yes it's a fine instrument. Would you like--" Raymond held the saxophone out to the stranger, watching him closely to see if he recoiled at all.

The man hesitated, "I couldn't possibly, I wouldn't want to damage such a valuable instrument."

"I insist," Raymond replied forcefully, moving around the desk to meet the man, "here, take it."

Raymond again held out the instrument for the man. The tall figure reached out slowly, watching Raymond curiously. He hesitated a second, then shrugged and took the horn in his hands. If this guy had the same affliction as Arthur's friend, he was better at hiding it.

"Well then you are a lucky man Mr. Raymond, this is a beautiful horn, and even in Paris a vintage Selmer in this condition is hard to find. If you ever want to sell, perhaps you could call me," the man said, handing it back to Raymond. Raymond saw that cold fish had been watching the proceedings bemused. He seemed to be more aware of the significance of that back and forth more so than his boss.

"I would," said Raymond, "if I knew who you are."

"Forgive my rudeness," the tall man finally sat down crossing his leg and sitting back in a relaxed position, "My name is Mr. Bisset, we understand you had a break in last night."

Raymond set the sax in its case and sat back down in his chair, first ignoring Bisset to tell the blonde, "you know you can sit down too."

Raymond motioned for his potential soulmate to sit down

on the sofa but she predictably ignored him and Raymond turned his attention back to Bisset, “yes I was, are you with the police or something?”

Cold fish scoffed, responding in French, as he fiddled playfully with one of the flintless Duponts “you know we’re not, why are we even playing these games?”

“DuBois, please, we are guests,” replied Bisset in English again, “As I was saying. We understand that you had a break in. We understand the culprits might have been a certain type of criminal, after a client of yours that is a certain type of girl.”

Raymond raised an eyebrow at Bisset, “I don’t quite know what you’re talking about, I’m pretty sure it was just some burglars. That is unless some of the tenors from the Opera company were getting rowdy again.”

“Was the girl here?” interrupted the woman tersely.

“Ah,” Raymond thought, “she speaks.”

“Why, jealous?” Raymond responded playfully, only to be met with an eye roll.

Raymond turned to Bisset, “I don’t know who you’re talking about, and if I did, I wouldn’t be a very good *private* investigator if I gave up information on my clients. So I’m sorry, I don’t really have anything to add,” he motioned towards the blonde, “even if she asks me again, but nicely”

Raymond considered winking at her but thought better of it. He wasn’t a particularly good flirt, and didn’t think drawing attention to that fact was going to help his case, “besides, I don’t see how a bunch of punks kicking in my door would be connected at all with any client of mine.”

“God, these lies are so boring,” Dubois threw his head back like an annoyed teenager, “I told you coming here was pointless, he’s not going to talk.”

DuBois lazily knocked a rosary off an end table and shot a

leer at Raymond, “Oh, and she’s not going to fuck you,” he said in a patronizing tone.

Just as Raymond opened his mouth to respond, the blonde shrugged, very obviously looked Raymond up and down, and responded, “I might.”

It was silent for about thirty seconds.

Finally Bisset broke in, “Perhaps we got off on the wrong foot.” Bisset stood up, “Maybe we should try this again another time when you’ve learned more open your client and feel like sharing. Just know though, that girl, and other things like her are dangerous.” Bisset clearly nodded his head towards each of the three crosses now adorning his wall, “but you seem to know that. Tread lightly Mr. Raymond.”

With that Bisset turned and left with DuBois close behind. Blondie had not moved.

“It’s Pascale,” she said, closing the door behind her partners and turning to Raymond. Slowly she walked towards him, parting her full pink lips slightly, and running her fingers through her platinum blonde hair. Pascale slowly leaned over Raymond’s desk and playfully twirled the silver crucifix that hung from her slender neck, before letting it rest against her toned chest. Her deep emerald eyes looked directly into Raymond’s, nearly hypnotizing him. Pascale’s eyes traveled down to Raymond’s lips and she leaned close to whisper, “I might not,” before turning quickly on her heels and leaving to catch up to Bisset and DuBois.

Raymond first exhaled. Then, he bolted into action, throwing a hoodie and glasses on as quickly as humanly possible and hitting the pavement. He wasn’t sure who these guys were, but at the very least he knew that they knew more about the world Zoe was now a part of than he did, and he needed to start getting some answers.

Raymond followed them to the Chaussée d'Antin - La Fayette metro station where the three of them boarded the southbound 7 line train. Raymond observed from a distance, and it looked like DuBois and Bisset were arguing, but he wasn't able to make out what they were saying. Admittedly his lip reading in French was much weaker than in English, and these guys were blowing up at each other at a mile a minute. Pascale seemed uninterested, mostly staring at her phone. Somewhere near the Pont Marie station she looked up at them and said something that got them to stop. Raymond was beginning to think that she was the type of woman that could make whatever she wanted happen, and allowed himself ten seconds to day dream about their nonexistent life together before getting back to work.

They continued in silence until all three rose to get off at the Les Gobelins station. Raymond quickly followed them the three blocks to their destination. Bisset, DuBois and Pascale all entered what looked to be a nondescript residential building just off Avenue des Gobelins, and Raymond checked his watch. It wasn't going to be dark for a few hours. He did a quick walk around the building to see if there were any different ways in or out of the house before finding a spot to stake out the door. He didn't know what these guys wanted with Zoe or Gordon or any other vampire related craziness he's run into since yesterday; but he was going to at the very least find out who they were.



## chapter fifteen

*Julia Ward*

RAYMOND HADN'T EXPECTED ANY action before night fell, so he wasn't surprised when, after the sun had set, a man, dark haired and lithe, emerged from the house across the street. The chill of the night didn't seem to faze him as he set off down the rue and around the corner.

Tugging his own collar up against the night air, and God only knew what else, Raymond set off , keeping a casual distance between himself and his quarry.

Focused on the windows as his prey passed, Raymond's suspicions were confirmed: another damned blood sucker. Shaking his head, he tracked the man along the Avenue des Gobelins where he entered La Manufacture.

Raymond had found what he was looking for.

Unwilling to offer himself up as part of the menu, he took up post at a good vantage point. Cell phone in hand, he dialed Zoe's number. When she didn't answer, he waited for the beep.

"Zoe," he said, quietly and clearly into his phone. "I've found what you're looking for. Meet me near the entrance to Carrefour City at Rue Abel Hovelacque and Avenue des

Gobelins.” After ending the call, he watched the restaurant. There was a crowd leaving, and he’d lost sight of the man.

“Shit,” Raymond whispered to the night. Did he stay out here or go in? Was it possible the man had seen him and was now ducking out through the kitchen? Did the place even have a back door?

Going inside wouldn’t be a bad idea. Act like a man who just wanted a cup of coffee on this chilly April night? Get his eyes on his mark.

He clapped his hands on his arms, rubbing to warm up. It was chilly enough that even within his jacket, goosebumps were rising.

As were the hairs on the back of his neck.

Lifting his eyes to the restaurant, he could just make out his reflection in the window. But...

“And what are we looking for, monsieur?” The voice was quiet near his ear.

*Son of a bitch.* Clearing his throat of any indication of surprise, Raymond said, “A place I can get a good *stake*. Know of any?” He turned, now eye to eye with the man.

If it were anyone else, he’d have said humour lit the eyes, but this man’s eyes grew darker as his lips curled in a gruesome grin. “You are a comedian, no? I like jokes. Tell me another.”

“I knew a vampire who became a poet. He went from bat to verse.”

The chuckle that emanated from the man did nothing to allay the tension. “Yes. You are a terrible comedian. I will be doing mankind a favour, will I not?”

“I don’t want to kill you,” Raymond said, reaching into his pocket.

The man laughed harder. “Oh, do not fear. You will not kill me. I will kill you.”

While the man laughed, Raymond pulled garlic from his pocket, shoving it toward the vampire's face. Zoe needed answers not a pile of ash.

The vampire, however, grinned impossibly wider, making Raymond's blood turn cold.

"I am Umberto. My mother is Italian." Long fingers wrapped around the bulb, taking it from Raymond's hand and carrying to the grinning mouth. He crunched it. Like an apple, garlic skins and all. "This is my favorite myth. My food is always pre-seasoned."

*Fuck.*

A group of laughing women passed, giving them little notice as they made their way across Avenue des Gobelins.

"Come with me, mon ami. Let us retire to someplace less...public."

"Where are we going?" Raymond dialed Zoe's number in his pocket, hoping to reach her as he was led down the rue.

"Somewhere with less traffic."

"Where would that be?"

"You ask a lot of questions for a man about to die."

"So allow me my last request." His heart pounded. If vampires were as strong as the myths said, Raymond was going to have to bring out heavier artillery. And while he wanted to keep this man alive for Zoe to question, if it came down the two of them, Raymond wanted to be the one still standing.

The man stopped, eying Raymond. Running his tongue over his lips, he lifted his head. "*Trop enquérir n'est pas bon*. For you, the English say: Curiosity killed the cat."

"Good thing I'm not a cat."

The smile was back. "No, you are a mouse. And I will play with you first." Far beyond La Manufacture was an alley.

Pushing him around the corner of the building, the man slammed Raymond against the wall, knocking the wind from him.

But he still tried to croak out, “Behind the restaurant.” He hoped he was loud enough for Zoe to hear over the phone. Or through a message. *Shit*. He was in deep trouble.

Dark eyes narrowed. “I hear your heart beating. Faster and faster.” The corners of his mouth curled upward. “You smell of fear. It is not my favorite. I prefer the sweet lust of a woman’s heart, but...” His lips parted over fangs.

Raymond struggled, managing to extricate a bottle from his jacket. The Holy water would get this monster to back off. Successfully working the cap off with his hand as the gaping maw approached, he splashed Umberto in the face.

Backing away, the vampire lost his grip. “What did you just throw in my face? Water? How rude!”

In the short distraction, Raymond bolted back up the alley and onto the rue, casting desperately for Zoe. Had she gotten the message?

A raging bellow followed him. “Don’t think I don’t know what you tried to do.”

He wasn’t fast enough to get away, and Umberto yanked him by the collar, dropping him to his back. “You...” He spit at Raymond before dragging him back around to the alley.

Flailing, grabbing at the building, the pavement, anything on which he could gain purchase, Raymond refused to accept his fate. He had only one more trick up his sleeve. God, he hoped Zoe showed up soon. Maybe she’d have that same vampire strength and they could get some answers. Until then... He pulled a white oak cross from his pocket, pressing it to his attacker’s hand.

The laughter echoed around the buildings that lined the

alleyway. “Another nice try. You are not so bad a comedian after all.” He yanked Raymond to his feet, the cross skittering away. “Now. Let’s try this again.”

A truck came through and parked, while staff from the restaurant waved and yelled to him in French before joining him at the truck.

As the vampire opened his mouth and leaned toward him, Raymond balled his fist and let it fly.

“*Che due palle!*” Umberto yelled in Italian, holding his mouth, black blood oozing. “*Encule toi, fils de pute!*”

Surprised by his lucky shot, Raymond choked down his fear and tried reason. “How about a civilised discussion?” As he shook the sting from his hand, he checked his possible escape routes as he continued. “One language instead of three. English will do.” More than likely, all the doors to the alley were locked from the inside. But with the staff out here, that delivery door...

Umberto cursed again in French as he spat blood and held a tooth, even as a new one grew into its place. “Look what you did. Too bad you won’t live to tell of your moment of indescribable luck.”

Angry that Zoe wouldn’t get answers, but not willing to risk his life, Raymond bolted for the one door he knew would be open, knowing Umberto would be right behind him, and cursing himself for leading an angry vampire into a cafe filled with people.

But as he sprinted up the stairs, drawing even with the dining area, he found it empty. Where had everyone gone?

His foot was grabbed from behind, pulling him to the floor. “Fuck!”

“I’m done playing with you, *saland!*”

Face down, Raymond scrambled, trying to get to his feet,

but his attacker put a knee to his back, pinning him to the stairs. “*Putain*, I will make this slow and immensely painful for you,” he whispered intimately in Raymond’s ear. “And each of your screams will be delicious.”

He tried to get up, but hands pinned his head and shoulder.

“You are shit, *souris*. And you will die the death of a fool.”

Hot breath chilled his neck as Raymond listened for any sign of Zoe.

A loud “clang” knocked the vampires head against his. *What the hell?* Before he could voice anything, the weight was off him and the vampire was cursing someone else in French.

The attacker, growling, stalked into the kitchen, and Raymond was behind him.

“Zoe.”

She flashed him a smile and held up the oak cross and a knife. As she sharpened the end of the cross, she addressed the angry vampire. “I have questions for you.”

“I have death for you.” He lunged at her, but she dodged.

“I need answers.”

“Death is your answer.” When she dodged his next lunge, he stood, grinning and turned to Raymond. When he lunged for him, Raymond punched him again, but this time, the vampire was ready, grabbing his fist and twisting his arm behind his back. “But first, my *amuse bouche*.”

As he leaned to bite Raymond, pressing him against the wall, the pressure intensified suddenly as if his attacker was leaning his full weight into him.

But rather than a bite, the pressure slid down with a thud to the floor.

“You okay?” Zoe eyed Raymond as he turned to face her, checking for injuries.

“As far as that goes, yes.” Looking down, Raymond saw the

sharpened cross protruding from Umberto's back. "Nicely done. Right through the heart. No answers though."

"No. Well, we know a stake through the heart kills."

"And, since you were carrying it, I guess we know crosses only work as stakes, huh?" He told her the results of the garlic and holy water attempt too.

"Some answers are better than no answers." Zoe brushed off Raymond's jacket, straightening it while she examined his face. "You took quite a beating."

Uncomfortable, he stepped back and straightened his own jacket, seeking another topic. "Yeah. We need to get rid of this thing." He indicated the prone form. "Can you help me get it to the dumpster out back?"

At her nod, they lifted the dead vampire, hauling him out to the alleyway, keeping watch for anyone. The kitchen staff were huddled around the truck, talking and laughing, and paid them no heed as they kept to the shadow.

"I wonder why they're all out here, anyway?" Raymond said, watching them as the two headed back toward the restaurant.

"I told them we were doing a photo shoot for a SlutDress and ManHo vampire campaign."

Studying her, Raymond agreed her plan, for however weird it was, had worked. "Should we tell them we're done?"

"Go for it. I could use a cup of coffee. And maybe a rare steak?" The gleam in her eye was disconcerting.

But, agreeing that a cup of coffee would be good, Raymond informed the staff the "shoot" was finished.

Seated, coffee in hand, Raymond wondered at the normalcy of the restaurant now. Staff moved around, giving them special attention, acting as if very little had gone on, while one vampire was in their dumpster...

And another sat across from him.



## chapter sixteen

*SR Martin*

THE DARK, RED BLOOD oozed slowly from the wound in the chest. The silver stake remained firmly planted. The vampire's cloudy yellow eyes were frozen open, staring wildly at the ceiling. The mouth, open and grimacing, revealed two sharp spikes of eye teeth gone wrong, resembling the fangs of a venomous snake.

Raymond eased back on his haunches and rested his hands on his thighs. He breathed slower now. The battle being over, the corpse was now more a problem of liability.

He scanned the empty confines of the café, its red decor bathed in dim, amber light. His eyes stopped on the only other soul (if that were still true) in the room.

Zoe held her hand to her lips. She stood in front of the small bar, gazing into the mirrored wall behind it. Contemplating her new physiological condition once again, she shifted slightly to the left and then to the right. The image in the mirror did not change. She could not see her reflection. She slowly withdrew her hand from her mouth and lowered her head.

The sickening scent of the corpse's blood pushed Raymond closer to vomiting. He stood up, shook off dripping blood from his hands, and surveyed the corners of the room. All was quiet.

He walked behind Zoe. "I'm going to wash up," he said.

He paused to see himself in the mirror behind the bar. The girl, solid in every way, physically present, audibly breathing, her last remnants of lavender perfume hiding a faint odor of perspiration, was not visible in the mirror. He watched her touch the two swollen wounds on her neck.

A buzzing sound emanated from the corpse. Through a pocket in its sheer jacket, Raymond caught the glow of a cell phone indicated an incoming call.

He shuddered and ran to the first lavatory door across from the entrance to the kitchen. He emerged in a half minute with the topical blood cleaned off his jacket and shirt but with stains that would betray him to any competent law officer.

But where were they anyway, these police, these patrolmen? It was past midnight in the 13<sup>th</sup> *Arrondissement*, a Monday night, and this part of town was characteristically quiet. There was no reason to waste resources and time on the neighbourhood of the *Café La Manufacture*.

He evaluated the unanswered phone call.

"They are looking for him," he said, stopping at each window, pulling back the blinds just enough to check the sidewalks of the *Avenue de Gobelins*.

"Why the attacks?" said Zoe.

"I don't know. Things have been rather uneasy here in Paris this year. Were he not a vampire," he said, jabbing his thumb in the direction of the corpse, "I would have suspected he was one of the *Gilets Jaune*."

"He may be a Yellow Jacket, for all we know. As well as a

vampire.” She shivered and walked toward the covered front windows. “If my fate is the same as his...”

“We don’t know that yet,” said Raymond. “But let’s focus on the immediate truth. We are at a the scene of a death. There are procedures we must follow to ensure we are not implicated for something worse than self-defense.”

Zoe glared at him. “You cannot call the police.”

Raymond turned to face her. “Surely we must. This is not something I can handle. And if we leave this place... any witnesses could...”

She touched his face with a cold hand. “They’ll lock me up.”

He nodded. “That is possible.”

“You know they will.”

“But it might be the best option. Surely this city has dealt with this problem before. This cannot be the first time an outbreak of ... vampirism has - “

“Have you ever heard of anything like this before?”

“My dear, I’ve only been here for three and a half years, and as I have told you, my dealings have been mostly with men and women who want to monitor a cheating spouse. But this situation is clearly beyond all normal investigative work. I am well-versed in French law, to the extent I have to be. And when I falter due to my lack of knowledge, I go to the police.”

“Don’t.”

Her gaze entranced him. His pulse quickened and slowed. Beads of sweat coated his brow. His lips trembled as he looked down on her. “Wh-what would you have me do?”

“I’ve been thinking about the list again.”

“The list of things you think are typical of vampires?”

“Yes,” she said. “So we know now that a vampire can be killed with a stake through the heart.”

Raymond nervously glanced at the still corpse. “That much seems to be true.”

“And we can see that I don’t... have a reflection.”

Raymond tensed. “Okay, I will grant that.”

“It is well past midnight. Dawn will be approaching.” She placed her hands on his. “Get me back to my hotel.”

“Okay.”

“I have to stay out of the sunlight.”

“I do believe I have heard that one, too.” Raymond cringed at the coldness of her hands. “I’ll have to hail an Uber.”

He withdrew his hands and walked back to the corpse. Kneeling, he fished through its jacket to pull out a late model iPhone. He rolled the corpse over and found a wallet in a back pocket. There were thirty Euros and a dog-eared business card from Maxim’s restaurant in the wallet, and nothing else.

“What are you going to do with him?” said Zoe.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Absolutely nothing. If you don’t want to involve the police, then why should we trouble ourselves with him any further?” Raymond rolled the corpse to face upward again. “Maybe that is a good way to get the word out that there is a problem... without risking your incarceration.”

Zoe nodded. “I like that plan.”

Raymond walked away from her and rested against the bar. He took out his smartphone and called up the Uber app.

*Zoe watched him. He’s frightened. Of me. He thinks I will attack him, just as I was attacked. Look at his hands... they are shaking. But I need him, for protection. That’s all. I can do my own research. As long as he fends off the next attacker. And the next. And the next...*

Raymond held his smartphone tightly and hurriedly moved to the windows again. Laying two fingers on the edge of the blinds, he peeked through to view the quiet street. "There could be one of them right outside the door. Off to the side. When the car gets here, we make a mad dash for it. You get in on the near side, and I will get in on the far side. And wait until I say go."

"I will," said Zoe.

A minute went by, and Raymond said, "Here he comes. Black Peugeot." He began to walk toward the main door of the café, then hesitated. Cocking his head, he shifted direction. As he passed the corpse, he reached down and pulled out the stake in one smooth motion, then continued toward the door. Watching to make sure Zoe could not see him, he placed the stake in the inner breast pocket of his jacket until its flat, silver head was out of view.

The black car stopped in front of the café, resting the tires on its right side on top of the low curb.

Raymond peered through the blinds on the door, then twisted the knob. He darted a glance at Zoe and whispered, "Let's go."

They entered the black night and ran for the car. Zoe quickly opened the nearest passenger door and got in, slamming the door behind her. Raymond swivelled his head in all directions as he ran, looking for motion of any kind. He saw none.

He jumped into the car and said to the driver, "*Merci. Allons-y!*"

The driver responded, "*Je vous en prie. Nous sommes en chemin.*"

The car did a u-turn in the empty avenue. As the driver accelerated, Raymond tapped the man's shoulder impatiently.

“*Non non! S'il vous plaît nous prendre dans l'autre sens!*” shouted Raymond.

“*D'accord,*” said the driver in a quiet, yet unnerved voice. He slowed and reversed course.

Raymond watched as the driver's iPhone, mounted on the dash, showed the resulting new path.

“What was wrong?” said Zoe.

“I didn't like the direction he was taking us.”

“Oh?”

“Toward the *Cimetière de Montparnasse*.”

Zoe's eyes widened. “Oh.”

As the car proceeded toward the Seine down the *Boulevard de L'hôpital*, Raymond was surprised to see traffic becoming thicker. It was not common for the early morning hours to see such numbers of cars. Many people were on the sidewalks, walking in both directions, but it occurred to Raymond that more of them were travelling in the direction of the river.

“This is strange,” he said to Zoe.

“Hm,” she responded.

Within another quarter mile, they were stopped completely. Out front, Raymond could see the roundabout just prior to the *Ponte d'Austerlitz*.

That view was static for the next five minutes. They had not moved. And more people were packing the sidewalks.

He took out his iPhone and called up Google Maps. He punched in Zoe's hotel, the *Hotel de L'arcade* and selected the icon that represented walking. It would take over an hour, but at this rate, it might be the best option if the traffic did not let up.

He looked at Zoe's face. The mild glow of the street lamps gave it a copper glow. He knew that was a false color; since he

first met her she was pale and ashen. It seemed her eyes were sinking deeper into her head. Her cheeks outlined the underline bone. She was not just thin...

... she looked like she was starving.

Raymond tensed. I've got to get out of this car. What if she... what if...

"Let's walk," said Zoe.

Raymond took a quick breath. "Interesting. I was just thinking the same thing." To the driver he said, "*Nous allons sortir ici.*"

Without waiting for the driver's response, he motioned to Zoe, and they both got out of the car. He tapped the conclusion of the Uber transaction and gave the driver the maximum tip.

"Are you feeling okay? It's quite a walk," said Raymond.

"I'm fine," said Zoe. "I just want to get back indoors."

They weaved around people who blocked their path on the sidewalk. Zoe heard discussions around her. She saw some people crying. Others shook their heads, registering dismay and disbelief.

"What is going on?" she said.

"There has been a fire. Somewhere up the river," said Raymond. "A bad fire."

They continued forward, slowed only by accumulations of onlookers trying to get to the river. As soon as they reached the roundabout, they could make out the orange glow about a mile up the river.

The *Pont d'Austerlitz* was blocked with people craning their necks toward the west, quietly watching. Some whispered in short bouts of discussion, but overall, the crowd was somber and silent.

It was that way, too, as Zoe and Raymond made their way

up the *Quai Saint-Bernard*, hugging the river's edge. When they got to the intersection of the *Pont de Sully*, the location of the fire was undeniable.

Zoe gasped upon the first clear view she had of the fire. Raymond shuddered as he realized that the fire, a blazing inferno with bright orange flames hundreds of feet into the air which illuminated a pillar of thick smoke rising vertically from the *Isle de Paris*, was consuming the *Cathédrale de Notre Dame*.

His mouth drew agape. The first thought to enter his mind: *Did they do this? Is this the work of the vampires?*

Zoe grabbed his hand. He spun to look at her agonized face.

She cried odd yellow tears and shouted, "What the hell is going on, Louis? First the Yellow Jackets, then the vampires, and now... this! Notre Dame? Notre Dame? It cannot all be unrelated. This can't be coincidence... they are going to attack everybody... everybody! Everybody! We are all going to be vampires!"

Raymond held her close to his chest, where she buried her face and sobbed mightily. Onlookers who heard her backed away, encircling them and watching them instead of the fire engulfing the roof of the ancient gothic church.

He adopted a quaint smile and repeated to those around them, "*C'est le stress. Nous sommes tous touchés.*"

Thinking better of continuing toward the fire, Raymond tugged on Zoe, held her hand with a firm grip, and pulled her in the direction of the *Pont de Sully*. The bridge was still thick with people. On the other bank, Parisians sat and stood quietly wherever they could, their faces reflecting the orange glow of the terrible fire.

But everyone was calm. There was not a sign of trouble. With the exception of the outburst from Zoe, the people of



Paris appeared sedate, if not understandably mournful.

The clock was ticking. Too much time had elapsed since they left the café. After a long look back at the raging fire of Notre Dame, they turned north to pass by the *Hotel de Ville*, its jaunty iron knights standing on the roof looking down on them.

Raymond considered that all of the knights may be vampires awaiting their turn to attack.

*April is the cruelest month*, he thought.

Four o'clock passed. The streets were clearing, but police had block some routes, particularly those closer to the *Place de la Concorde* due to Saturday's demonstrations of the *Gilets Jaune*.

Raymond looked at his iPhone. The display did not respond. The battery had died somewhere along the way after they reached the Tuileries. He remembered generally where Zoe's hotel was. Generally.

At the *Place de la Concorde*, they turned up the *Rue Royale*. Raymond eyed the front of Maxim's and remembered the card in the vampire's wallet.

Tired and dehydrated, he looked down at his Apple watch. The battery had died on it, too. Ahead of him, Zoe trudged along.

"Not too far to go," he said, catching back up with her.

"My feet hurt," she mumbled.

"Mine, too. Come on, lass. We're almost there." But he could not remember the route to the hotel.

And now that they were farther away from Notre Dame, and now that the residence of Montmartre were getting whatever extra sleep they could before the dawn, there was nobody to whom they could ask directions.

As they blearily made their way to the *Eglise de Madeleine*, a decision made in the exhaustion of a night of death and fire

and dread of the future set them on the wrong path. A left turn may have helped, although, as in all hindsight, it does not matter.

What does matter is that the sun pierced the sky over the low hills across the Left Bank just as Zoe and Raymond reached the *Opera Garnier*, with its imposing marble steps and its gilt ornaments.

Raymond saw the gable of the building painted with the orange rays of sunlight.

Zoe saw it, too, and emitted a piercing scream that bounced off all the buildings nearby.

Raymond lifted her in his arms and carried her down the steps, an instinctive move to get as far from the sunlight as possible.

With her wilting form dangling from his powerful arms, he ran around the side of the building, keeping the direct rays blocked. He looked ahead and saw a garbage truck enter through the iron gate at the rear of the building.

Running faster still, tripping occasionally on the uneven sidewalk, he reached the gate and slipped in before the garbage men could detect him.

He found a darkened cove in a loading dock sheltered from the outside. Panting and crying out in pain with each breath, he scanned the back wall of the loading area. One small door was cracked open.

Begging his legs to hold out, he broke into a gallop. Bumping the door open with his back, he gently pivoted Zoe's unconscious body into darkness. He laid her down on the floor, returned to the door to close it, and with his back against it, slid down into a crouch.

He breathed deeply and slowly. His heart pounded. Letting his eyes adjust to the darkness, he made out Zoe's body on the

floor. A tiny sliver of the outside light formed a thin line to her left.

*Get her away from that...*

He lifted up his exhausted frame. His legs wobbled as he raised Zoe to her feet. Placing her arm around his shoulder, he walked her away from the sliver of light deeper into the Opera building.

When it was sufficiently dark, he stopped. He held her silently, allowing the visions of the past two evenings to flood through his mind.

Zoe groggily came to. She moaned and wrapped her other arm around his neck.

“Thank you for saving me,” she said.

A brief but penetrating thought entered his head, but he immediately dismissed the murderous notion of letting her be exposed to the sun.

“It is all I could have done,” he said to her, bowing his forehead to meet hers.

Even in the darkness, he could sense her eyes looking up at his. It was not just her eyes. He could feel her looking at him. Memorizing him.

In the dark, holding her, he felt the coldness of her body against his. It was not natural. He knew that.

But oddly, he did not mind.

He found a wall nearby. He lowered Zoe to sit against it, then he walked away, inhaling slowly, exhaling slowly. The cold air was musty but it gave him relief.

As he began to clear his mind, he heard Zoe shift against the wall.

“Raymond?”

“Yes, lass.”

“Raymond?”

“I’m here.” He spun around toward the direction of her voice.

“Raymond... Louis... I’m... “

He halted his deep breathing. He could not tell if it was voluntary, or if something... someone...

She swallowed, licked her lips and said, hoarsely, “I’m starving...”

## chapter seventeen

*Kaide Li*

RAYMOND HAD NEVER FELT this tired before. He had once not slept for four days straight and still did not feel as exhausted as he did now. For the past few hours, he had been doing nothing productive except following the shadows cast on his table as the morning sun rose from the horizon. He was on his fifth cup of coffee as he struggled to focus on the documents on his desk but the words ran by in a blur as his eyes slowly closed, then fluttered open, only to then close again. The sixth cup was a mistake. After that, he could not fall asleep to ease his sense of exhaustion, yet was not mentally awake enough to continue his work. He was basically a breathing body he had no control over, no awareness, just fatigue. And he stayed in his half-conscious state for hours, his chair welded to his body over time with him barely moving, staring at the shadows growing across his desk.

A loud ringing drew his gaze towards the phone. He watched it for a few moments, not registering the sound with a phone call he was supposed to answer. Briefly though, the ringing brought him back to reality and he was suddenly aware

of being in his office, his papers scattered all over his desk. When he awoke sufficiently to realise that his phone was ringing, he reached out a weary arm and answered the call.

"Raymond - you're here. What took you so long to pick up the phone? There're two men outside here who wants to speak to you. I almost thought you weren't in, I didn't see you come in today, but they were certain you are in your office."

"Tell them to come another day."

"How can you make these nice men wait? You better come out right now."

Raymond was slightly surprised. The receptionist was the last person he would think to hear describing anyone as "nice". Out of curiosity more about the personalities of these men than who they were and what they were here for, Raymond popped himself out of the shell of his chair, took a sip of water from a glass that was left on his desk since the day before and went out into the hallway. Two men were chatting with the receptionist when he came out. He could not hear exactly what they were saying but could hear them laughing among themselves.

"Hey Raymond." One of the men said as he looked up and saw him approaching. "Shall we talk in your office?" The other man turned around and waved at him with a sheepish grin on his face. Raymond did not recognise either of them before but they seemed to refer to him with a certain sense of amicable familiarity.

"Sure," Raymond replied tentatively as he led the men into his office, wondering whether he was supposed to know them, whether they were past associates he had forgotten about. He shut the door behind them and invited the men to sit.

"We'll dispense with the formalities now, Raymond." The man who first greeted him outside at the hallway spoke with a

coldness that sent a chill down Raymond's back. He was definitely fully awake now. The man straightened his posture and appeared to tower over Raymond, the features on his face set into an emotionless slate. Raymond tried to search his face for the man he saw earlier but although it was the same face, his friendly demeanour seemed to have vanished completely. "Our boss will meet you tonight."

"Who is your boss? And if I say I'm not free?" Raymond shot back, careful not to sound rude in front of these men.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was just being polite. It was not a question, it was an order." The man smiled at him, baring a set of neat, white teeth. Something about the two men struck him as odd, and suddenly, thoughts racing, Raymond wondered if the two men were vampires. Since the time they killed the two vampires, he had been worried that someone would be fast on their trail for revenge. However, the sun was still out and these men had shadows so it appeared unlikely. The thought brought him some relief. In spite of his fatigue, his instincts kicked in searching for a way out or a way to take them both out. He was about to grab the pistol hidden under his desk when the man continued speaking, "however, our boss is a reasonable man. You can choose where to meet and we'll choose the time. Just one more thing, remember to bring that girl as well, the girl called Zoe Evans."

"What do you think they want from us?" Raymond asked as he ushered Zoe quickly into their office. "The men who came, they were not vampires but there was an eerie coldness about them."

"I suppose we'll find out in a while." Zoe replied. After the men left, Raymond had called Zoe immediately and they arranged to meet at his office to confer about the situation

first before heading out to meet the men's boss.

"They did not threaten me but they made it clear as day that they would be able to track me down no matter where I am and that there is no use trying to run away. They would just find me again and again. If we had to meet, it might as well be now than later." Raymond offered by way of explanation as to why he agreed to the meeting. "I have chosen this restaurant along the main street, it's very open, with affordable pricing and good food so that means we'll expect a comfortable buffer crowd to grant us some protective coverage." He took a quick glance at Zoe but she did not show any sign of what was on her mind. All she did in response was to nod and say, "well then... let's go. At least we would enjoy the food."

The short distance to the restaurant seemed to take them longer than before, an awkward silence between the two of them. Raymond felt that he should be afraid but the weariness was still taking residence in his body and he wondered whether it was what made him feel calm. If that was not the reason, it was probably the confident strides in Zoe's footsteps alongside him.

Zoe tried to quiet the rambling thoughts in her mind and the numerous questions she had for the person when she meets him, if she meets him. She had heard rumours about him, this man and his machinations, so when Raymond described his encounter, she had her suspicions about who it would be. However, she was uncertain if hearsay alone would be prepare her sufficiently for her to face the man. Then again, she could be wrong about everything she had learnt about him.

Raymond and Zoe entered the restaurant and was led to a table.



"So much for a crowd, huh?" Zoe asked Raymond as they settled into their seats and the waiter handed them the menu. "Today's soup of the day is tomato soup. Let me know when you're ready to order." The waiter bowed slightly and left them to themselves. Ordinarily, the restaurant would be crowded at this hour and there would even be a slight queue outside waiting to come in. However, today the restaurant was hardly filled up, with only three other tables had diners who were tucking into their meals.

"Do you think he is already here and watching us?" Raymond asked Zoe when she turned back to face him.

At the table nearest to them, a couple was enjoying steak and red wine, chatting happily with each other in their own world, oblivious to what was around them. A few tables down, there was a family of four, the mother trying desperately to get a spoonful of macaroni and cheese into her fidgety daughter's mouth while the father was attempting to stop his son from running off pretending to be an airplane flying between the tables. In the farthest corner by himself, a man sat sipping some soup. He seemed to sense their eyes on them and he turned. He had ruddy cheeks and a head of wavy hair whose strands seemed to messily arranged in just where they were intended to be. He raised a glass of red wine as if as a toast. Then, he stood up and suddenly started walking over.

"Do you think that's him?" Zoe whispered, trying not to stare and smiled back sweetly. As he came closer, she saw that the man had no shadow with light shining from the ceiling chandeliers. He looked slightly overweight but was otherwise quite charming with a youthful glow about him. He was dressed in a well-fitted shirt and a pair of dark slacks. When he reached their table, he beamed and Raymond noticed a dribble of red at the edge of his mouth. When he noticed him gaping

slightly, he took out a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his mouth.

"My apologies, where are my table manners. The tomato soup here is really delicious. You must be Raymond and Zoe." As he spoke, his eyes bore into theirs. "I am George Gordon. Please come join me for dinner." Without checking if they followed him, George marched forward and two waiters from different corners of the restaurant hurried over and escorted them to their private dining room.

Raymond and Zoe sat side by side with George across from them, his arm draped across the spare empty chair beside him.

"Come, come. Don't stand on the ceremony with me. Let's order and let's eat. You chose a good restaurant, Raymond. It's one of my personal favourites. I also happen to be good friends with the restaurant owner." George chuckled as he said that, almost like he was mocking Raymond. He eyed Raymond and Zoe carefully, his glance never grazing too far from them as looked up from the menu and offered to order for them based on his recommendations. They complied tepidly, unsure of his intentions; was this good will or a trap?

Three bowls of tomato soup came and as George started on his bowl without another word, Raymond and Zoe quietly followed. The entree was steak for everyone, George's almost looked like it was raw inside. Again, he ate with such relish and the two of them did so too in silence. When they finished their mains and the waiters had returned to clear their plates, George finally spoke.

"I suppose my men have introduced me and you know who I am."

"Actually I -" Before Raymond could finish his sentence, Zoe cut him off.

"Is this about the vampires we killed?" Zoe asked.

"Young lady, very clever. You have taken two of my friends' lives. Don't you think we should get something in return from you?"

"And who will return me my friend's life that was taken?" Zoe blurted out loud without meaning to.

"Ahh... a tricky situation we have here, haven't we? So, I'll like to make you a deal. If you'll leave my friends alone, we'll leave you alone as well. A sensible arrangement, don't you think?"

Zoe and Raymond exchanged glances. If George had wanted to kill them, he had all the opportunity to do so since the time they entered the restaurant. They were in his turf and he was a much stronger vampire than she is. For all they knew, they could also have been surrounded by his men. Could they trust that he would really let them off? So far, no harm had come to them and George had been nothing but courteous. It was as much as Zoe had heard about his reputation as well, that he was a gentleman even to his enemies.

"Two lives for a life, I think you've already had the larger side of the bargain." George leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table. His voice was low, almost a growl, his eyes steely cold, reflecting not their wary faces but an inky darkness.

"Deal!" Zoe suddenly exclaimed and began to stand up and leave.

"That's good to heard," George replied and beamed at them. "Don't be in such a haste to leave though, there's still desserts."

Just as he said that, a waiter came over to their table and placed a red velvet lava cake in the middle between them. Using a knife, he began to divide the cake into three equal

slices. Raymond watched mesmerised as steaming hot chocolate flowed out and puddled around the base of the cake. As the waiter served them a slice of the cake each onto plates in front of them, Zoe felt an immediate shortness of breath. She traced with fearful realisation the waiter's hand holding the piece of silver and looked at up George who was nonchalantly sipping his wine, seemingly unconcerned nor affected in the same way she was. In fact, she thought she noticed the end of his mouth twitching upwards into a smirk.

As they walked out of the restaurant back towards Raymond's office, it was Raymond who walked with a spring in his steps this time.

"Well, that went much easier than I thought. Did you see him? We could have died today. You made a wise decision. Still, I'm surprised you agreed but it's your case after all so I am in no position to interfere anyway."

Zoe reached out her hand and grabbed Raymond's arm. "I am thankful that you agreed to help me with the investigation despite the risks it's putting you into. I don't think things are so simple though, in fact, it's just starting to get more complicated."

"What are you talking about? You're scaring yourself. Didn't we just leave the meeting safely?" Raymond reassured her but there was a little tremble in his response.

Zoe stood in front of Raymond and held on tightly to both of his arms now, forcing him to look at her. "I will always be grateful to you and I want you to be safe. You might want to leave town for a bit as soon as you can and stay low." Zoe's voice quivered, an urgency in her tone as she spoke and Raymond wordlessly nodded.

## chapter eighteen

*Pete Becker*

*APRIL IN PARIS*

*Whom can I run to*

*What have you done to my heart*

The words came unbidden into Zoe's mind. She knew the song well, the duet between Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, celebrating being in love in Paris in the springtime. But now it had a darker meaning. "Whom can I run to", indeed. Kate was dead. Zoe didn't know anyone else in Paris, didn't know anyone she could run to for help. And she'd turned into a vampire.

The immediate threat was gone, though. The truce with George Gordon gave her time to absorb her new status, maybe figure out what to do next, where to go. Or maybe just sit in her hotel room and live on room service for a few days.

It was a fairly long walk back to the Hotel de l'Arcade, but despite being tired, she decided to take her time and visit some of the sites of Paris on the way. That might help her calm down from the non-stop adrenalin rush she'd been trapped in.

She wandered westward, in the general direction of her

hotel, and found herself in the Square de la Tour Saint-Jacques, a small park surrounding a tower that the guide book said was the last remnant of a 16th century church. There were about a dozen people in the park, and there was a food truck selling soft drinks, ice cream, and cigarettes. Maybe some ice cream would help her relax with her newfound, but probably temporary, relief from stress.

As she stood, idly looking around and trying to forget, for the moment, the terror of the weekend, a young man approached her. Speaking with a perfect French accent, but excruciatingly slowly, he asked,

“Excusez moi, ou est le Metro?”

*Not a native speaker, Zoe thought. Too much practicing on the computer, not enough in the real world.*

“I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

He pursed his lips, turned away, and strode off. *Oh, he’s embarrassed. Was I too blunt? Well, I didn’t want to talk to him, anyway. Besides, it’s time for some ice cream!* She stepped to the back of the line.

When she reached the front of the line she looked up at the craggy face of the man inside.

“Chocolate ice cream, please.”

He glared at her.

*What? He’s offended because I didn’t use French? I thought they didn’t to that any more.*

“Um, glace de chocolat, sil vous plait.”

He continued to glare, without moving. The gargoyles on Notre Dame couldn’t have done it any better. She considered just going away. Bet that would make him happy!

“Yes, you’re right, I don’t speak much French! Can’t I just get some ice cream?”

Stony glare.

She heard a woman's irritated voice behind her.

“Mais enfin, monsieur. Elle voudrait une glace au chocolat.”

He scowled at the woman, but turned away and rummaged in the freezer. He came back with a frozen paper cup of ice cream and a small wooden spoon. He slammed them down on the counter in front of Zoe.

“Trois euros”.

She pulled some change out of her pocket and managed to find a 1 euro and a 2 euro coin. She handed them to him. He waved the back of his hand at her in an obvious gesture of dismissal as he turned to the woman behind her. Zoe grabbed her ice cream and stepped aside. She didn't ask for a napkin.

The woman who had helped her stepped up to the counter and started talking to the vendor. Although Zoe couldn't follow the conversation, it was obvious that they were arguing. Eventually the vendor fetched some ice cream, took her money, and gave her the same wave of dismissal that he had given Zoe.

The woman was tall, with coffee au lait skin; curly, chocolate brown hair; and beautiful dark brown eyes. She wore a necklace with her name on it.

“Merci, Angela”, Zoe said. Angela gave her a quick, weak smile and walked away.

Zoe burst into tears. The ice cream man looked at her with a small smile of triumph. Zoe turned and walked rapidly away, not caring where she was going, just trying to manage the flood of emotion that the terror of the past few days and the rudeness of the past few minutes had unleashed.

Walking helped. A bit. She quickly got her tears under control, but continued to churn inside. *Don't try to think yet. Just keep moving. Wear it down.*

She kept moving. After about five minutes that seemed like forever she felt that she could at least put together a coherent thought. *Why is this happening to me? What's wrong with those people? All I wanted was some ice cream.* She walked on. *Hell, I don't even want this fucking ice cream.* She threw the ice cream into a waste bin. It made a satisfyingly loud bang against the side. She kept on walking.

*What I really need is a cigarette. But I'll be damned if I'll go back to that twit in the food cart.* As she walked she kept an eye open for a store that might sell cigarettes. No luck. Then she spotted a pack of cigarettes and a lighter sitting on a windowsill. Nearby were two men engaged in a frenzied discussion and not paying attention to the cigarettes. Zoe grabbed the cigarettes and the lighter without breaking stride and put them in her pocket.

The street she was on turned right; ahead of her was a grand hotel. She stopped. *Come on, Zoe, get it together. You can't just wander aimlessly for the rest of the night. Figure out where you are, and decide what to do next.* She looked around. She could see the Seine river down the street, about a block away. Water had always been soothing for her. She stepped out toward the river.

When Zoe reached the wall along the bank of the Seine she stopped and leaned her elbows on the wall. Gazing out over the water, she pulled out the pack of stolen cigarettes and the lighter. She removed one of the cigarettes and put it between her lips. She lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply, feeling both the rush from the tobacco smoke and the calming effect from reawakened memories of quieter times. She closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. She took a couple of steady breaths and slowly opened her eyes. Reaching high above the buildings across the river she could see the steeple of the Notre Dame Cathedral. *The Cathédral de Notre-Dame*, she



corrected herself. She had not grown up Catholic, but immense churches and cathedrals had always given her a feeling of awe and of safety. She gazed across the water at the steeple for some time as the anger and fear that she had felt slowly retreated.

She turned around, leaning her hips against the wall and her setting her elbows on top of it. Not quite ready to leave her relaxed state, she immersed her mind in the street scene in front of her. The young couple pushing their baby in an immense stroller; three young men walking rapidly and talking boisterously; and off to her left, a man in evening wear with a hat pulled low over his forehead so that she couldn't see his face. *Nice suit*, she said to herself, as she turned to look at the squabbling couple on her right. Her timing couldn't have been better — just as she turned, the woman slapped the man hard in the face and stormed off. Deciding that she oughtn't invade their privacy any further, she turned back to her left. The man in the suit had stopped walking and was leaning against the wall, about thirty meters away from her. He, too, was looking toward the street, but she had a feeling that he had been looking at her, and had turned away just as she turned toward him.

Feeling nervous, she turned right and walked about twenty meters. She looked back, and the man in the suit was again leaning against the wall, but he had moved as far as she had. She picked up her pace and turned right across the Pont Louis-Philippe. She glanced back over her shoulder. He was definitely following here. She picked up the pace even more as she crossed the Pont d'Arcole, onto the Île de la Cité, two blocks from the Cathédral.

She covered the two blocks swiftly, hoping that there would be a crowd in front of the Cathédral that she could get

lost in. Unfortunately, it was nearly closing time, and the only people in front were on their way home. *Well, no help here. Maybe there's something inside that can help.* She took one last look back at the man in the suit. He had apparently lost his hat, and she could see his face. *No, we have a truce! Why is that vampire following me?*

She slipped quickly past a couple of dawdlers in the entrance and stepped into the Cathédral. For a moment she was awestruck at the size and grandeur of the inside. But the vampire was following close behind her, and she couldn't take time for sightseeing.

She rushed over to the holy water font and took out the pack of cigarettes. Fortunately, the previous owner hadn't been one of those people who throw away the cellophane wrapper. She took it off and dipped it into the font, being careful not to let her fingers touch the water. The vampire came toward her, and when he was about two meters away she pulled her hand out of the font and threw the water-filled cellophane at him, hitting him in the face. The water splattered on his skin and down onto his suit. There was a gasp from the handful of nearby churchgoers who had seen this sacrilege. And it didn't work! The holy water didn't affect him! He wiped his face with his arm and smiled as he continued to walk toward her. *No*, she thought, *this can't be.* She ran down the nave to the transept and turned to her left. There was a small area cordoned off with yellow tape. She jumped over the tape and came to a narrow door. Pulling on the handle, she found it wasn't locked. She stepped inside and pulled the door shut.

She was at the base of a spiral staircase made of stone. *Well, no choice now, got to go up.* The staircase took her to a gallery overlooking the nave. She heard the door snick closed below

her; he was still behind her. She had no choice but to follow the gallery, back in the direction of the entrance.

The gallery took her to one of the towers at the front of the cathedral. A dusty walkway led her to a stairway. Once again there was no way to go but up. And up. And up. Finally, legs protesting, she reached the top of the stairs. A doorway led to a wooden catwalk that ran the entire length of the building, just below the roof. There was no place else she could go; she stepped out onto the catwalk. Fortunately, it had railings on both sides — it was a long way down to the floor.

The light up here at the top of the Cathédral was quite dim, except for a bright rectangle ahead of her on the left. She moved carefully along the catwalk and discovered that the rectangle was the doorway into a small room and the brightness came from an electric light inside. She stepped inside and closed the door as silently as she could. It had a lock that she could lock from the inside. With the door securely locked, she examined her surroundings. Not much to see, just a couple of dusty tables with some ancient tools and a pile of junk in the middle of the room. And there was no way out other than the door she had just locked. If he figured out where she was, she would be trapped.

She heard him calling to her in a singsong voice:

“Zooo-eeee, Zooo-eeee, come out and plaa-aay!”

She stayed silent behind the heavy door.

“Zooo-eeee, Zooo-eeee, where aaaare you?”

*Just in case, I'd better have a weapon.* She picked up an old piece of pipe. It felt heavy in her hand. Then she saw a fairly new rectangular can with a screw top, labeled “diluent a peinture”. She didn't know what that meant, but when she unscrewed the top the smell gave her an idea. She grabbed a bucket from the junk pile, set it on the bench, and turned the can upside down

over it. The contents gurgled down into the bucket.

“Zooo-eeee, Zooo-eee, I know you’re in there, come out and plaa-aay!”

*No, he doesn’t know I’m here. He’s just trying to scare me. He didn’t see me...* **SHIT!** The door burst open. She jumped back to the other side of the junk pile. He stood in the doorway, smiling at her. **RUN!** She struggled not to move. The monster in her id was trying to take charge. **NO! NO! There’s no place to run to. My plan will work. GET OUT!**

“Hello, Zoe. Remember me?”

“Of course I do. You killed Kate. How could I forget that?” She moved a couple of steps to her right, closer to the bucket.

“Yes, Kate was an unfortunate accident. I feel bad about that. All I wanted was to feed on her. She’d have been fine afterwards. But there was something in her blood that just didn’t agree with me.”

**RUN! NO! There’s nowhere to go!** “So you killed her. And turned me into a vampire!”

He sighed. “Sometimes you get unlucky. I didn’t want to turn you. I must have had a cut in my mouth, and some of my blood got into you. For that I am truly sorry. You were very tasty.”

**TASTY! Throw something at him and run! NO! My plan will work.** “Why are you chasing me? I made a deal with George Gordon. We have a truce!”

“You’re so naive. Truces were made to be broken. The important thing with any truce is being the first to break it. Take your enemy by surprise.”

**DO SOMETHING! Throw something at him! NO! GET OUT! My plan will work. You know I won’t get out. I’m part of you. I’ve always been here. You’ve been keeping**

**me down, but now you need me.** *Maybe throwing something at him isn't such a bad idea.* **Throw something at him!** She picked up a wrench and threw it at him, deliberately aiming a bit to one side. He dodged it, stepping to his right. Zoe moved one step to her right, staying opposite him and getting closer to the bucket.

**AGAIN!** Once more she threw something at him, a hammer this time, and he dodged to his right. She moved to her right, and now the bucket was within reach. She hesitated. **NOW! Do it.** She knocked the can off the top of the bucket. It hit the floor with a metallic clunk.

**NOW! NOW! NOW!** The vampire started toward her, but he was too late. Zoe tossed the contents of the bucket at him and pulled out the stolen lighter. A moment later the vampire was wrapped in flames. The smile that had been on his face turned into a glare of anger, then a rictus of pain as he tried to scream from lungs that were on fire. He fell to the floor and didn't move.

Zoe ran to the door and out onto the walkway. She fled toward the staircase, but stopped a moment to look back. All she saw of the room was flames, burning out through the doorway and beginning to char the wooden wall of the maintenance room.

Zoe jogged to the stairway and started down the stairs. *Another one bites the dust.* **There's nothing you can't do now that we're working together.** *No, nothing.* Zoe smiled.

## chapter nineteen

*Marilou Goodwin*

ZOE TURNED HER BACK on the fire. Enough was enough. It was time to get this over with. No more monkeying around with the little guys when she knew who sent them.

The walk took nearly an hour, but it was peaceful this time of night. Zoe breathed it all in. There was a good chance she'd never see any of it again. She couldn't continue to be the lucky one, surviving when everyone else died. Even the harried woman carrying a screaming infant to a car parked on the street was peace of a sort. A peace that said the world could continue without her.

And that was fine.

She'd done more, learned more, in her short life than she'd ever expected. Vampires being real was a huge part of that but there was something about 4am Paris that relaxed her. Even those up to no good had gone to bed. 4 am was for those in the service industry who were waking up to the start of their day. And infants with no sense of time management.

And now for vampires heading off to confront the bigger badder vampire trying to kill her. The creature responsible for

Kate's death and for Zoe's survival of sorts. For Notre Dame, and her other near death experiences. For her new learning experiences in how to kill vampires, which was horrible too, in it's own way.

She checked the address again, and the time.

It would work. She was nearly there and wouldn't have long to keep him talking. She wished Raymond was there to talk it over with, but it was safer this way.

He was safer this way.

And Zoe needed to know she could do this on her own. If she lived through the night, she would have a long time on her own. Lifetimes, even.

Did vampires live forever? She hadn't tested that one yet. Only time would tell.

She ran fingers through her hair and straightened her spine. Paris at night was making her maudlin when she should be getting down to business. She checked the address on last time against the numbers written on the door.

She was there.

Her chest and shoulders tightened, and she breathed against the sudden burst of fear. Had she heard something?

She scanned the streets, modern lighting keeping it from ever really being dark, and saw nothing. Shaking the fear from her shoulders, she reached for the handle and put a little extra force in her grip. It would keep the humans out, but not vampires. The wood splintered as she put her shoulder into it. The door remained intact, but security was only as good as the doorframe.

It opened into a small reception area that was surprisingly empty though appeared to have been used far more often than the one in Raymond's office. There were even two doors in the back wall, unlike the one in his. She wondered for a second

who filled the second space, but suspected it was one of the vampires out hunting her. Hunting either her, or an easy meal.

A jolt of fear spiked through her. What if he wasn't here? What if he was out hunting like all the others? Or what if he'd gone home to prepare for sunrise?

It wasn't like she'd invited him for the showdown.

Just as she'd given up, a door opened in the back wall and a man peered out. He was white with ruddy cheeks and tousled hair. His expression switched from annoyance to a welcoming half smile as he opened his office door wide and stepped to the side, sweeping an arm toward the opening in invitation.

"You must be Zoe, I'm George. George Gordon. Come on in. I'm glad to finally meet you."

His space was richly furnished. The desk was gleaming wood and the chairs covered in brass-tacked leather. Full velvet curtains covered one wall in a deep red that would only be creepy if you knew what he was.

And he didn't look it. He was rounder than anyone they'd ever cast as a movie vampire. Not huge, but nowhere near gym-rat fit.

The carpet was slate gray and the shelves on the wall matched the glossy wood of the desk. The odds and ends covering the shelves looked expensive as did the slim laptop on the desk. It could have been a study of opposites between this office and Raymond's, between the vampire and Raymond. Raymond would have a real shot at any movie vampire role where the vampire looked like an average executive.

Zoe moved quickly by the vampire all the way to the far wall, though he could have stopped her if he wanted. She stood near the curtains, fingering them idly. They were soft, but heavy. Made well enough to block the light. She could have



glanced outside to verify, but she'd rather take the chance than to clue him in to her plans too soon.

There was nearly half an hour left before she could test this last myth.

"How good of you to come see me in person." George left the door ajar and crossed to close his laptop. He settled into the tall throne-like chair behind the desk and turned it to look at her, looking for all the world like a king deigning to speak to a peasant.

Zoe weighed the odds of the open door being for her comfort or to signal backup and found backup more likely. It didn't matter. She did feel more secure not being closed in even knowing he was almost certainly faster than she was. That was probably the human in her.

She shrugged, looking for her missing confidence, and faking it with a straight spine. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"And where are the men I sent to retrieve you?"

She shrugged again, nodding toward the laptop. "Did you catch the news of the fire?"

His face tightened, but he forced a smile. "You killed them?"

"The good news is that now we know that killing vampires with fire isn't a myth." She had never been a great actress, but now she acted unconcerned for all she was worth, lifting a curtain only slightly to glance outside before walking away and sitting in one of the heavy brocade chairs facing the desk. This could work as long as he didn't have reason to suspect. There were only minutes left.

"Why must you question me in all things?"

"I forgot, we had a truce, didn't we?"

He stood with a snarl, leaning across his desk. Zoe was

behind her brocade chair before she realized she'd moved. She'd come to face the big boss, depending on vampire mythology and nature to save her.

"Do you even know who I am?"

"George Gordon, vampire boss." She snapped back. The wood in the back of the chair frame groaned under the pressure of her fingers, giving away her fear. She dropped her hands to her sides.

"That is only the beginning. I am the first of this line. Killing me kills everyone created with my blood. Are you ready to die, Zoe?"

Sometimes. Now, she wasn't sure. She pulled out her phone to check the time. "You mean again?"

He was across the desk and she was pressed into the wall with his hand at her throat before she saw him move. "Who do you think you are?"

Every word was punctuated by another slam into the wall. Zoe clawed at the arm that held her and flailed her legs, somewhere between kicking at him and trying to find purchase to hold herself up. Self-preservation was instinct, even when she thought she'd come to terms with dying.

Sometimes.

She needed to fight with her brain, not her instinct. She was already dead, after all.

Zoe squared her hips on the wall, letting him support her, while drew up both legs and kicked. He flew backwards, hitting his desk.

"Don't expect me to fall into line, just because that's the way it usually works." Zoe reminded herself she wasn't human anymore and resisted touching her throat. Was it time yet? How could it not be?

She ran toward the curtain, and felt herself flying, hitting a

shelf, falling behind the desk. He'd thrown her, somehow, and was on top of her before she could figure out which direction was up. She raised her hands to defend herself, but he was a flurry of motion, punching her face, her ribs, wherever he could reach from his position straddling her stomach. She did her best to catch some of the blows in her arms, but everything hurt and she couldn't match his speed. She tried to use her legs to buck him off, but his elbow came down into her solar plexus, dropping her back down the ground with a level of pain she'd never experienced as a human.

Then someone else was there. In the room. His backup had come and he hadn't even needed it. He'd kill her long before she could manage to reach a curtain. She stopped trying to defend herself and felt along the floor for anything that might help.

Glass shards from the odds and ends. Wood shards from the broken shelf.

Wood shards.

She grappled through the pieces wondering why his backup wasn't stopping her before she could find something small so she could grip it in one hand, but big enough to do damage and suddenly there it was.

She jammed it under his ribs from the side, not even close to reaching his heart, but enough to make him stand. More in shock than pain, she guessed, scrambling to her feet to look for the backup. Two to one destroyed her odds, but it wasn't in her to give up without a fight.

George was pulling the wood from his side when she saw him.

Raymond stood there, tall and certain, next to the velvet curtains waiting to catch her eye.

Zoe flung herself under massive wood desk and watched

the makeshift stake hit the ground moments before the yellow light of sunrise filled the room.

The sound George made was something she hoped to never hear again in her lifetime, however long it might be. The fire was quick and hot enough to melt the carpet where he'd been standing. Zoe wrapped her arms over her face, trying to hold her ears and hide from the sun all at once, expecting to be set on fire as well any second, but then the room cooled as quickly as it had heated up. The only light coming from the halogen bulbs in the ceiling and Raymond was there helping her out from under the desk.

Her lungs hurt as if she'd just run for her life and she noticed the little details. The perfect burned handprint on the wood desk. The melted divot in the gray carpeting where he'd stood. Tightly closed curtains. The makeshift stake, burned clean with tiny burned spots scattered around it, as if even his blood couldn't handle daylight.

Raymond's worried expression.

"You didn't leave town." She said finally, when she stopped shaking.

"And let you have all this fun to yourself?" His gesture included the burned carpet and suggested the destroyed door in the other room.

"The sunlight thing is not a myth."

"You are well and truly stuck now."

Her eyes widened. "I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"Good thing you have a human here you can send for snacks and movies."

She rounded the desk, touching the charred handprint and thought of never being in the sun again. "I'm glad you stayed."

"Me too."