

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 bottom 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

Originally published: 2019

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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

Jacqueline S Miller

KATE INVITED ZOE ALONG on the spur of the moment.

“Why don't you come away with me tonight?”

“Where?”

“Paris.”

“Tonight? Oh, I couldn't...”

“Why not? The hotel's booked. All you'll need are your toothbrush and some euros. Two can stay as cheaply as one.” This was not quite true as Kate was relying on Zoe to share the bill. Kate had been extravagant this month and overspent on two pairs of shoes and a bridesmaid's dress for her cousin's wedding. That was the problem with working as a buyer of men's fashions — she rarely managed to get any discounts for herself, and she wouldn't want to be seen dead in the women's fashion on slutdress.com, their other internet site.

Zoe squinted at her from the fuzzy image on the cracked screen of Kate's mobile phone.

“But it's such short notice,” Zoe said, indecisively twirling a lock of her brown hair between her fingers. “And you know how much I hate travelling.”

“It’s only to France. We’ll be there in a couple of hours and it should be fun. Don’t you think we deserve a break after the terrible week we’ve both had?” Kate used her most wheedling tone of voice. “Just think of all the fashion we’ll see on the Champs -Élysées. And it will be good to have a change of scene — or even a change of Seine.”

“How will be get there?”

“On the Euro Express. I’ll email you the details and you can book your ticket.”

Kate and Zoe arrived at the Gare du Nord several hours later. The train had been delayed at Kings Cross with many stops along the track while they waited in the ominous darkness. Zoe had clutched Kate’s hand anxiously. She had suffered from post traumatic stress disorder ever since the deaths of her parents five years ago in a fatal car crash, and it seemed to be getting worse. Kate sympathised but believed Zoe could only overcome her fears by facing up to them.

“Don’t worry, we’ll soon be there,” she said while they waited for the train to start moving. Kate began discussing fashion to distract her. “My boss wants me to find some Gothic lines for our Halloween feature. It’s going to be all cloaks and long boots this season, and that’s only for the men.”

“As long as it’s not cloaks and daggers,” Zoe said, nervously smoothing the frayed knees of her denim jeans. “I’ve been designing the posters for the women’s fashions. I’m interested to see how they do things in France.”

Now, feeling tired and bedraggled, they dragged their weekend cases across the station forecourt at the Gare du Nord.

“I’m so glad we made it to Paris,” Zoe confessed. “Every

time the train stopped I imagined the English Channel gushing through the ceiling of the train and drowning us!”

Crowds of tourists loitered near the station exit.

“Excusez moi s’il vous plait,” Kate said, pushing through the crowd just as a flash of lightning lit up the black Parisian sky. “I’m glad we didn’t fly here. There’s a storm brewing.”

Huge raindrops clattered onto the cobblestones outside.

“We need to get to our hotel before it gets any worse,” Zoe said and pulled her suitcase over something hard and bumpy. The case toppled over and split open, spilling clothes and toiletries onto the ground.

“You’ve run over my foot!”

These words were spoken in English but in a strange accent, possibly French but perhaps not, Kate thought. Someone must have been watching them, or listening.

While Zoe clambered around collecting her things and stuffing them back into the case, Kate looked up at whoever owned the unusual voice and the injured foot.

He had long dark hair which framed a pale angular face. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses and he wore a black cloak and high-heeled boots over tight leggings. Kate studied his clothes with interest. They were precisely the type of garments she had been instructed to buy. Goth wasn’t her style, of course, but clearly there was a market for it.

The man undoubtedly had a certain ‘je ne sais quoi’ about him, Kate thought. She apologised in English, forgetting her schoolgirl French for the moment. She stared blatantly at his clothes and a scuff mark on the front of one of his boots.

“I like your clothes,” she said. “I’m sorry my friend ran over your toe with her case.”

The man hesitated, then threw back his head and laughed. Kate couldn’t help noticing that his teeth were yellow and

crooked.

“Merci,” he said. “And I adore your blonde hair.”

Zoe was staring at the man too. There was something about him which she didn’t like.

“It’s not really blonde. She dyes it,” she said irritably and nudged Kate’s elbow.

Zoe bent down to examine the bent wheel on her case. “I think a screw’s missing.”

“Could you direct us to Le Metropolitan Hotel?” Kate asked.

“But of course. Le Metropolitan is on the 17th Arrondissement,” the man said, propelling Kate out into the night air. A gust of wind blew his cloak, causing it to flap wildly away from his body. Kate glimpsed an ornately embroidered velvet suit and a cream cravat. “Turn left and first right and it’s there.”

“Thank you,” Kate said, while Zoe scowled at them both and pushed her way past into the night air.

The man drew his blood red lips back into a broad smile. “Merci. The pleasure is all mine.” He made a flamboyant gesture with his gnarled, yellow hand. “Au revoir, mes petites filles!”

“Come on!” Zoe called, impatiently pulling her rickety suitcase over the cobblestones. There was a lull in the storm which proved to be temporary as it broke again into full force a few metres from the hotel.

Bursts of thunder and lightning occurred in rapid succession and huge raindrops pelted down on the two English women. At last, they reached the brightly lit foyer of Le Metropolitan. A blast of warm air greeted them, together with the smell of aromatic food from the hotel restaurant.

They trundled up to the reception desk, leaving a trail of

puddles in their wake on the marble floor.

The Gothic man was standing by the reception desk.

“Why, hello again,” he said.

Zoe ignored him, while Kate secured their room number and key from the receptionist.

Kate turned and smiled at the cloaked stranger. She felt grateful for his directions to the hotel and intrigued by the large feathered hat he now wore. In the bright light of the foyer she could appreciate the full glory of his elaborately embroidered suit. His cloak appeared to be of pure silk with an unusual sheen that resembled green and red sparkles. Reaching out she touched his cloak, surprised to find it bone-dry, despite being worn in the pouring rain.

He grabbed her wrist and smiled, then drew her hand to his lips and kissed it.

“Mademoiselle is most charming,” he said.

“Oy, get off her!” Zoe yelled, pulling Kate away from his grasp. “Don't you have anywhere else to go?”

“I was just checking that the pretty little English misses arrived safely,” he said. “Paris can be such a dangerous place, my dears.”

He laughed and tipped his hat at them.

“Au revoir.”

Kate watched him saunter towards the exit, but Zoe turned and hurried in the direction of the elevator.

In the lift the women were silent until they reached their floor.

“Do you think he followed us from the station?” Zoe asked as they entered their room.

“He can't have. He was in the foyer before we arrived.”

“But he knew we were coming here. He's creepy!”

“He was just being polite. The French have different

customs to us — like kissing everyone on both cheeks.”

“You're too trusting,” Zoe said.

“Not really. I loved his clothes — especially the hat. I wanted to ask him where he bought everything, but you kept interrupting. You were rude.”

“No I wasn't. He was being a creep.”

“He looked elegant. That whole Gothic look is very ‘Now’, like I told you.”

“Was he a Goth?” Zoe asked. “He looked more like a Zombie.”

“No, definitely not a zombie.” Kate hesitated — she didn't like to say what he might be. “Anyway, what do you think of the room?”

Zoe shrugged. “Not much. Why is there only one bed?”

“Because I originally booked for myself. I didn't think you'd mind.”

“There's not much I can do, especially as you're paying! At least it's a double. Bagsy I get the side near the radiator.”

Zoe sat on the bed gingerly and tried the mattress. “It feels hard. Not much bounce. I wonder how many thousands of people have slept in this bed?”

Kate opened her case and took out her own special pillow and a nightdress.

“Best not think about it. Anyway, a recent survey showed that the most expensive hotels are the grimiest.”

Zoe scoffed. “I wish I'd stayed home in my own comfy bed. Is it worth changing for dinner?”

“Probably not. I've a feeling we'll have to go out for a meal.”

“Why?”

“Because the restaurant here closes at ten and it's past that now. Why don't we have a walk round Paris and then an early

night...”

“It’s too late for that,” Zoe interrupted.

“Then tomorrow we can visit the Louvre and catch up with the Mona Lisa.”

“I’m not bothered about seeing the original, and I don’t want to go out in a storm.”

Kate looked out of the window.

“I think the storm’s finished. It’s not even raining.” Looking up she fancied a shadow flitted across the moon.

They took the elevator downstairs. The concierge confirmed that they were too late to dine at the hotel but that there were plenty of wonderful restaurants open nearby.

Walking down the famous Champs-Élysées, Kate said,

“Isn’t this wonderful. You get on a train and a few hours later you’re in an exciting new capital city.”

“I prefer London,” Zoe declared. “And I can’t be doing with all these cobblestones.”

But even Zoe was impressed with the brightly lit shop windows and department stores. They jumped over puddles and huddled inside their jackets, trying to avoid the spray from the traffic on the main thoroughfare.

“Wow! Look at this, Kate,” Zoe said, stopping outside a large window of a department store.

Kate looked. She saw a tableau of mannequins dressed as witches. They were grouped around a metal cauldron which was balanced upon a papier-mâché fire. Kate studied their green faces, tall pointed hats, wispy grey hair and grotesque faces. A stuffed black cat with bright yellow eyes and an arched, bristly back stood next to the witches. To the left of him were two ghouls, and at the very end, stood a figure in a dark cloak. He had long hair which framed a pale angular face.

His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses. The cloak was tied back with wire so that his ornately embroidered suit was revealed.

“Amazing!” Kate said. “I told you this Gothic fashion was all the rage over here. Remind me to come back tomorrow.”

“Not likely,” Zoe said. “That creep must shop here. The mannequin on the end is his doppelgänger.”

Kate rummaged through her bag for her phone and typed the name of the store. Then, stepping back, she snapped a photo or two.

When she closed the camera app she glanced back at the shop window but the figure in the cloak had disappeared. Kate felt a sharp pang of fear stab at her heart.

With fingers that trembled, Kate scrolled through the photos stored on her phone. The witches and ghouls were there, but there was no sign of the Gothic man in the cloak.

Kate glanced at Zoe. Perhaps she hadn't noticed. She decided not to worry her, especially since she'd been so nervous on the train coming over. Zoe still suffered from PTSD, and Kate didn't want to risk making it worse.

They found a little all-night café on the Rue de Blanche. It was chic with neat little tables and black and red tablecloths. The food was Nouveau Cuisine, which meant you didn't get much for your money. Kate had a mushroom omelette while Zoe had hers plain with a side salad.

The place had been crowded when they arrived, but was emptying out now. In the corner, Kate espied a lone figure sitting at a table. He wore dark glasses and a cloak. In his hand he held a glass filled with a red liquid. He smiled at Kate through yellow teeth smudged with red, and waved a white gloved hand at her.

“I think we should leave now,” Kate said, praying that Zoe would not look round and see the Goth. Maybe Zoe had been right after all and he was some sort of a creep, intent on stalking them. It was too much of a coincidence that he kept turning up wherever they went.

“I’ll pay,” Zoe said. “I’m beginning to enjoy myself. I think you’re right— we have to face our demons head on.”

Kate thought that Zoe had never said a truer word.

Somehow, despite consulting the sat-nav on Kate’s phone, they managed to lose their way during the walk back to the hotel.

“How did we get lost? It was only a couple of turnings from the Champs-Élysées,” Zoe said as they found themselves in a dark alleyway filled with rubbish bins.

“Excuse me, mademoiselles. Are you lost? Perhaps I can be of assistance.”

Their exit had been blocked by the Gothic man in the cloak and boots, who now stood before them. He had removed his hat and glasses, and his eyes glowed like red rubies.

“Yes, please,” Kate said, noticing how his pointed teeth gleamed in the moonlight and that he held something in his hands.

“No, we’re fine...” Zoe began, just as the metal bar crashed into her skull and sent her flying. She landed in a heap on the cobblestones.

Kate opened her mouth to scream, but before she could do so, the monster had grabbed her by the throat. Kate felt her airways constricting.

“Please don’t,” she begged silently, while the monster emitted a wail so high pitched that only a bat would hear it.

His lips attached themselves to Kate's throat and he forced her to the ground.

"Oh please," Kate cried silently as his fangs ripped at her throat. "I just need to know where you buy your wonderful clothes. I mean, are they even French?"

Somewhere in the back of her mind she had a hunch that he might have bought them in Transylvania...

chapter two

Keith Blount

ZOE STRUGGLED BACK TO consciousness like some prehistoric creature clawing its way to the surface after millions of years fossilised in sedimentary rock. Even conscious, an epoch seemed to pass before she knew who she was, before she was more than raw animal awareness.

She lay still, her eyes closed, letting sensation and memory gather like ants around a fallen apple. Bodily awareness came first: a stiffness so deep it felt as though every muscle had tensed and turned to stone. She tried to concentrate on relaxing her limbs. It's this hotel bed, she thought; it's too hard. And Kate must have turned up the air conditioning again: she was freezing.

Kate.

The memory of the attack came like an electric shock, and she jerked upright - or as upright as possible. Her nose met a solid metal ceiling with a sickening crunch, and a searing pain surged through her skull, soon followed by the rusty taste of blood pouring over her lips.

This was the first inkling she had that she was trapped

inside a box.

She opened her eyes to find only perfect darkness. Her heart became a hammer drill. She tried to reach out but her arms were restricted by something.

And that was how she found out that she was not only trapped inside a box, but also sealed inside a bag.

The word “panic” comes from the old god Pan, whose booming voice was said to be so terrifying that it could make his opponents lose all reason and take flight. It was as though his awful voice was booming in Zoe’s ears now, making her head throb and drowning out all thought, as she gasped for breath and wriggled, and screamed, flung herself in all directions, and screamed and screamed, liquid terror coursing through her spine.

By the time she stopped to catch her breath, her struggle had revealed to her the dimensions of her prison: the dimensions of a coffin, metal walls in all directions.

I’ve been buried alive. The thought was like swallowing something large and sharp. But her confines were metallic - who got buried in a steel coffin?

I’m dead, she thought. *This is death. This is what death feels like.* But even as she thought it, she knew it wasn’t true: you can’t be dead. Being and death are opposites. Whatever she was being - terrified, cold, trapped - it wasn’t dead. She was in the world, and her only hope was that someone would let her out of her prison.

Her nose now feeling like a smashed aubergine, she took several deep breaths in a vain attempt at calming herself and tried to work out what to do. If she didn’t get out soon, she really would be dead. She’d starve. Or freeze.

Shuffling her small body lengthways until she could feel

the metal wall at her feet, she began to kick and shout for help, the reverberations of the metal reassuringly loud. Her entire world became reduced to kicking and shouting and hoping.

She froze. Somewhere beyond her feet, she thought she had heard a voice, but was terrified she'd only imagined it. She tried to slow her ragged breathing so that she could listen. Nothing. She yelled again: "Hello? Help!" Now she could definitely hear movement. There was a clunk. Then a sliding sound, like a long drawer being pulled open. She felt herself moving, sliding along with the sound. Above her, a woman's voice, urgent, said something in French.

It now occurred to Zoe that whoever was out there was probably responsible for doing this to her. In an instinctive effort to escape, she lurched sideways. The knowledge that she was no longer in a box was at least some consolation for the painful landing she made on hard floor after a short fall.

As she groaned, she heard the woman moving above her, muttering, and then the shushing of a zip. Harsh light made Zoe flinch and shut her eyes tight. Opening them gradually, gingerly, she found herself on a tiled floor in a room all sterile whites and silvers. Crouching in front of her was the woman, wearing a white lab coat, face mask and mob cap, her eyes a mixture of concern and shock. Zoe's first thought was that the woman was some psychopath preparing to do something terrible to her. But then she saw the rows and columns of small steel doors set into the wall next to her. One was open, a long drawer protruding from it - the drawer from which Zoe had fallen.

The word *morgue* floated through her head, for some reason in large red lettering.

Zoe shrugged herself out of the plastic bag - the words

body bag chased after *morgue* - and, still unsure of this woman crouching before her and cooing at her in French, scrambled backwards on her hands and heels until she clattered into a gurney behind her.

Without taking her eyes off the woman - doctor? morgue worker? - Zoe reached up behind her and used the gurney to pull herself to her feet. She saw the woman's eyes widen with concern before feeling the pain herself. She turned to the gurney to find its source - a scalpel resting there had lodged itself deep into the palm of her hand, splitting the soft flesh like a boiled tomato.

But the scalpel didn't matter. She pulled it out without even noticing the blood that dripped from her hand onto the cool white tiles of the floor. The pain span off into some foggy corner of her brain.

The reason her lacerated hand seemed insignificant lay in what she had seen on the gurney.

What she had seen on the gurney was the naked body of a young woman. Huge strips of flesh were missing from the body. Half of the face was swollen purple. A broken rib stuck out like a new tooth. A section of intestine poked through like a glistening bald caterpillar.

The bruising and mutilation didn't make the young woman unrecognisable, though. Zoe recognised the her. The young woman was Kate.

Zoe staggered, her knees suddenly weak. Someone had cried out - an odd, strangled sort of yelp - and she supposed, by process of elimination, that it must have been her, though it seemed so distant. She doubled up and vomited a thin gruel of bile. The woman stepped forward as though to help her, but she seemed in two minds about it. Zoe saw why: she was still

holding the scalpel that she'd pulled from her hand. Instead of dropping it, she held it out in front of her defensively. She couldn't think straight; she had some strange notion that the woman wanted to cut her open. Perhaps that was what the woman had been telling her in French: "The paperwork's done. The death certificate all filled out. You're officially dead, so I have to do an autopsy. More than my job's worth not to. Just lie down. Don't make a fuss. There's a good girl." Zoe laughed manically at this idea.

The woman, confronted with a back-from-the-dead patient wielding a scalpel and laughing manically, wisely calculated that more help was needed, and edged fearfully around the room to the door, only breaking into a run once she had the door open.

Zoe leaned against a wall for support and let herself slide to the floor, taking pleasure in the streak of blood her hand made on the white wall. There was something hypnotic about the blood, the red of it. She found it beautiful.

Across the room, a computer idled, its screensaver showing the name of the hospital: *Hopital Hotel-Dieu*. Didn't that mean the God Hotel? It seemed apt. It confirmed she was in a hospital and not anywhere more sinister at least. In a *morgue* in hospital, but still...

They thought I was dead.

Why would they think that?

She thought of the strips of flesh missing from Kate's body and remembered: that insane man. His frenzied attack. So strong that even the two of them couldn't fight him off. And those jagged teeth, tearing at her neck...

She touched her throat now, felt all around it with her fingertips, but there was no wound, nothing at all. How was that possible? She remembered vividly the sensation, the

intensity and purity of the pain, of his teeth sinking deep into her neck, the hot gushing blood. She pulled up her T-shirt, which was covered in that very blood, now dried, but there wasn't a mark on her body. In fact, underneath the numbness, the shock and the fear and the grief, she felt surprisingly - good.

There was something else beneath the numbness and shock too: some bright new instinct that she'd never felt before. It was nagging at her to do one thing: escape. The rational thing, she thought, the sensible thing, would be to wait for the woman to come back with help. They would tell her what had happened, put her in a hospital bed. She would tell the police about the attack.

But she didn't need to stay in hospital. As the tremors of fear and shock began to ebb, as she began to thaw, as her limbs lost their stiffness, she was becoming aware of a new sense of strength. She wasn't only uninjured: she felt fitter than ever. Was that just an effect of the shock? No, she didn't need help, and it was too late for anyone to help Kate. Wherever this new instinct had sprung from, it was insistent that she should leave, telling her that it would be better to avoid questions and examinations.

She stood up and let herself out of the room. Outside, the corridor was bright with strip lights but empty. The woman had turned left on her exit so Zoe turned right, winding her way through a maze of corridors and up two flights of stairs until she found a fire exit.

It was night. Her breath condensed in the air. Doctors moved with purpose between the buildings. A patient with a drip on a trolley sat on a bench nearby, smoking. No one gave her a second look - she was just another blood-soaked patient.

Checking her purse was still in her jeans pocket, she set off

to find a taxi.

Back in her room - her and *Kate's* room - at the *Radisson Blu Le Metropolitan*, Zoe sat at the end of their double bed, head in hands, waiting for her mind to clear, for the parade of images to dissipate - razor teeth, Kate's flayed body, a streak of blood on a white wall, the dark horror of being on the wrong side of a body bag. She felt the deep body exhaustion of someone who had been crying for a long time.

One of Kate's bracelets lay on the bedside cabinet, large, silver and Celtic. Feeling a fresh wave of grief, Zoe reached for it, but it was the strangest thing: its very touch burned her fingers as though it had only just been taken from the forge. She dropped it and recoiled. Thinking that it was just the cut from the scalpel, she examined her hand, but that was strange too: the cut was gone. She spat on her palm and rubbed away the dried blood, but there wasn't even a mark. Next she ran her fingers over her nose, which she must surely have broken, but it felt fine.

She went to the bathroom to check. The mirror was above the sink, but she avoided it at first, scared of what awaited her there - her nose *felt* fine but it must surely be a mess. She ran the hot tap and splashed water over her face, ran wet fingers through her hair. Bracing herself, cringing, she looked at herself in the mirror.

Except there was no self in the mirror. Zoe's brain stuttered and froze at the impossibility of it, like a computer trying to divide by zero, but there really was something wrong with the mirror: she wasn't in it. Her rising panic was quelled a little when she realised that someone must have replaced the mirror with a window that looked onto a bathroom identical to hers, but reversed. And with mirror writing on all the

bathroom product labels.

The panic returned. The mirror was on an outer wall; there was no room behind it. She looked away, counted to ten and looked back into the mirror. There was the glass shower partition and the shower behind it. There was the shampoo and soap on a shelf. There were the towels. Only the one thing was missing from the image.

Almost frantic now, Zoe turned, ran to the shower and turned it on, again returning to the mirror. Now the mirror showed the running water of the shower.

The mirror was doing everything that you'd expect a mirror to do. Everything, except that it wasn't reflecting Zoe.

Zoe stepped into the shower fully clothed, curled up into a foetal ball, and stayed there until long after the steam had wiped all reflection from the mirror.

Freshly clothed and smelling of soap, Zoe surveyed the hotel room. She felt numb, unable to process whatever it was that was happening to her. On stepping out of the shower, she had wiped the mirror, expecting to find herself there, to find that it had been a hallucination, a product of what she had been through - but still the mirror was obstinate in its refusal to reflect her.

Perhaps she really was dead, she thought. Perhaps she was a ghost floating through the world that nobody could see. But then she remembered that the woman in the morgue had seen her, and so had the taxi driver. She'd think about it later.

For now, all she wanted was to get out of there. It was still dark outside, but that new instinct was telling her that darkness was exactly what she needed. Something else to think about later. Retrieving the cash and credit cards that she and Kate had stashed under the mattress, Zoe left the hotel with no real

idea of where she was going, and even less an idea of what she had become.

chapter three

Ian Philpot

BLURRY. EVERYTHING WAS BLURRY.

It wasn't just Craig's vision, which would have made sense because he had wondered if he put his contacts in the wrong eyes that morning. It was a sudden and complete disappearance of sensation and thought. The delineations of particles and opinion, of self and matter were of no consequence. The world was formless and empty. This void is all that is or was or ever will be. Craig was lost to everything.

But there was a noise coming from somewhere. It was annoying, and it pulled at Craig. The high-pitched whistle was urgent, but it wasn't an emergency. His hearing was back, but it felt distant. He could start to see shapes in the blurriness. There was light. There were colors and shadows.

Where am I? he thought. Craig turned his head, and he recognized the table, the couch, the kitchen. *This is my apartment, but what time is it?* He walked into the kitchen and blinked hard as he looked at the digital display on the microwave. 5:12. He looked to the window. It was the afternoon.

The whistle got suddenly louder, and he turned to see a pot of tea steaming. He reached to take the kettle off the heat, but there was something in his hand—his phone. It showed that he was on a call. He raised the receiver to his ear and said, “Hello?”

“Monsieur? Are you zere?” the accented female voice asked.

“Yes,” said Craig with a crack in his voice. He cleared his throat and said, “Excuse me. Yes. Yes, I’m here.”

“Are you all right?” the woman asked.

“I—,” Craig started, but there was a sudden, cool sensation and a slight itch on Craig’s cheek. He wiped it with his hand and felt something. He pulled it away from his face and saw tears. *I’m crying*, he realized. “I—I don’t know.”

“I’m very zorry for your loss,” said the woman, “but...”

She continued talking, but Craig wasn’t listening. He was remembering what had happened just moments before everything got blurry. It was like recollecting something that was distant in his mind, and the memory hit him along with the emotions. The woman on the phone was French. She said she was with the police prefecture in Paris. She had told him that his sister, Zoe, was dead.

Craig took a deep breath and sniffed his runny nose. “Excuse me a moment,” he said, his voice cracking again. He put his phone down on the kitchen counter and wiped his hands against his eyes. He took another deep breath and straightened his posture. *Not now*, he thought. *Focus*. He turned off the heat under the teapot and flipped the cover over the spout to stop the noise. He turned on the faucet at the kitchen sink and ran some cold water. He put his hand in the stream to sense the temperature, and he ran his thumb across the tips of his other fingers as the water cascaded over them. It was

smooth and comforting. When it was cool enough, he leaned over the sink and splashed the water on his face. He grabbed a kitchen towel and patted his face. He pulled open a kitchen drawer and rooted around for a pen and notepad.

“Okay,” he said picking up his phone, “what do I need to do?”

Craig stood at the gate counter in Heathrow Airport as the agent typed into his computer. Craig pulled the piece of notepad paper from his pocket and looked at his notes.

Zoe and Kate dead

Won't share details over phone

Need to identify bodies and get belongings

Hop on flight — tonight or tomorrow — go to morgue

If tonight, ask for Claire Laurent

“Mr. Evans?” said the gate agent. “I’ve been able to place you on this flight, and I’m sorry for your loss. If you just have a seat, we’ll begin boarding in just a few minutes.”

Craig opted to stop by the bathroom instead of sitting, and thought about the earnest sentiment of the gate agent. Sure, he said he was sorry for Craig’s loss, but it was spoken like it was part of his script—a courteous but insincere routine that someone in that line of work has to say from time to time without any real meaning behind the words.

Craig splashed cold water on his face in the bathroom. It helped to stifle his growing numbness and his frustration with the gate agent. He looked in the mirror as he grabbed some paper towels to wipe off the water dripping down his face. He caught eye contact with his reflection, and he realized he was the last of his family. This pudgy face with a big nose and thinning hair was the best the Evans family had left in the world because it was all that was left. He was solely responsible for the legacy of his family, the last of his kind.

“Now boarding Group 4,” Craig heard from a speaker over his head as he stepped out of the bathroom.

He walked into the queue and considered the simple things he knew about his parents. He had plenty of memories of them and felt a connection to them, but they had died in a car crash so many years ago that he didn’t feel the same grief and sadness that he felt for his sister. She had so much going for her, so much potential. She was destined for great things.

“Wondering how you’ll ever get through this?” asked an accented voice behind him. Craig silently turned and saw a woman behind him. She was about his age, and her accent was American. “It will take longer for us to get on board that we’ll be in the air.”

“Yeah,” mumbled Craig.

“Once the plane gets to cruising altitude, we’ll start our decent,” she said with a smile. She was short and blonde and incredibly friendly for a stranger. But she was American and had no idea what had happened to him, so he didn’t fault her for her intrusion.

“Yeah,” Craig said with a stronger voice this time. He reached into his pocket for his boarding pass and he felt the notepad paper.

“Are you going to do anything fun?” she asked. She seemed so kind that Craig didn’t want to tell her the truth. But, at the same time, he couldn’t think of a good lie.

“No,” he simply said. “Are you?”

She made a face that showed she was interested in why he gave the answer he did. “Me neither,” she replied coyly. “It’s my first time, so I’m doing boring things like visiting the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, Musee d’Orsay... Definitely not fun things. This trip is all serious. I’ve made myself a rule that I’m not allowed to smile once we land.”

“That sounds like a strange rule.”

“I’m an American,” she said. “I don’t want to stand out. Is there anything the natives loathe more than an American in Paris?”

“Do you speak any French?” he asked.

“I know a little from studying in high school,” she said. “I think it’s enough to get me by.”

“I’m glad I caught you then,” he said. “Whatever you do, don’t speak French to French people. They really don’t like that. They all know English, so there’s really no need to try to get by on what you learned in school.”

“Excuse me, sir?” said a voice from another direction. It was the gate agent. Craig had made it to the front of the line, and it was his turn to scan his boarding pass.

“Sorry,” Craig said as he realized he was holding up the line. He proceeded forward, leaving the nice, blonde woman behind him as he walked into the gangway. Being alone in a narrow walkway reminded him of his current situation. The sadness returned and so did the numbness.

Craig found his seat and saw the blonde woman pass his seat.

“Have a good flight,” she said with a warm smile.

“Thanks,” Craig mumbled. He thought to say, “You too,” but she was already too far away.

There was a buzz in Craig’s pocket, and he pulled out his phone. There was a text message. He hunched over his phone as he read the screen.

From Jane Peterson: “Hey! Just finished with a client dinner. Still want me to drop by?”

Craig let the weight of his torso pull him forward until his head hit the seat in front of him. He felt the seat’s occupant shift, and he immediately apologized. “So sorry.” He sat back

and began typing a reply.

“I’m not at the flat. Got a call from Paris Police. Something happened and Zoe...”

He froze and considered all of the different ways to end the message. “Passed away?” “Is gone?” “Is no longer with us?” After a minute of overthinking it, he typed “...is dead,” and hit send. Moments later, his phone rang. It was Jane. Craig sighed and answered it.

“Hi.”

“Craig, I’m so so sorry,” she said. “What happened?”

“I...,” he started, but he struggled to find the words. He hadn’t received details from the police. The tears began to well in his eyes, and he knew he would begin sobbing if he had to keep talking.

“Ladies and gentleman,” started the voice of a flight attendant over the plane’s PA system, “at this time I would like to ask that you turn off and stow all large electronic devices and put your phones into airplane mode.”

“I need to go,” Craig said with a sniffle.

“Are you on a plane?” Jane asked surprised.

“Yes,” he said. “They asked me to identify her and collect her things, so I went to Heathrow and got on a plane.”

“Craig—”

“I need to go,” he said cutting her off. “The plane is taking off.”

“You should have told me. I could have—”

“I need to go,” he said again. “I’ll call you when I land.”

“Okay,” she said. “I love you. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Craig opened his phone’s settings to put the phone into airplane mode. Before he could tap the button, a new message came from Jane—it was a heart emoji.

Craig spent the flight thinking about all of the responsibilities he now had. He had to figure out how to get Zoe's body back to London and make her final arrangements. But then there was a flood of other things—he would have to talk to her landlord, her boss, her credit card companies. He would have to tell each of them the same story over and over and over. Then he realized that maybe he wouldn't have to tell her boss since her coworker Kate had died too. Maybe her family would tell their employer, so they would be expecting his call and he wouldn't have to go over the details again.

He remembered when he and Zoe had gotten together at his apartment shortly after she started the job.

“Promise not to laugh,” she said to him with her eyes wide.

“Promise,” he said with a smile.

“No,” she said as she hit him on the arm. “You really need to promise me that you won't laugh.”

“I promise,” he said. “Wait, you're not going to be a graphic designer for an underground brothel, are you?”

Zoe sighed. “You're not far off.”

Craig laughed. “Can you at least get me a discount?”

“This is exactly why I didn't want to tell you,” Zoe said as she hit him again. “And it's not a brothel. It's a fashion company.”

“I don't get it,” he said. “How is that at all like a brothel?”

Zoe pulled out her phone, typed in something, and handed it to Craig. The site had a bright red logo that read “SlutDress.com.” Craig scrolled and saw pictures of scantily pressed girls in sexually suggestive poses.

“Oh,” he said with a grin, “they sell clothes for brothel workers.”

“No,” Zoe said as she grabbed her phone back. “They're party clothes.” She began typing something else into her

phone.

“They’re just the kind of clothes that you wear,” he replied jokingly.

Zoe was notorious for always wearing jeans and t-shirts. She was proud of it, and that uniform was a part of her persona as an artist.

“They do make a line for men,” she said as she handed her phone back to Craig. In a similar font but colored blue, the logo at the top read “ManHo.com.” Craig scrolled and saw pictures of men in bootcut jeans and tight-fitting, lace crop tops. “And, in case you see anything you like, I *can* get you a discount.”

“Not interested,” Craig said. Then he changed his tone and asked, “Are you sure this is what you want to be doing?”

“Yes,” she said. “I may not like the company or the clothes, but I love that I get to put my schooling to work. I like building things and sending them out into the world. I feel so much satisfaction with it. I love it.”

“Okay, now I know something is wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re in a job that you like. Maybe you didn’t get the memo when you were at university, but people aren’t supposed to like their jobs. It’s a rule.”

“Well, I’m the exception to the rule.”

Craig closed his eyes long and hard on the plane. Zoe had always used that line about being the exception to the rule. That was just her being who she was, and he felt sad knowing she wouldn’t be the exception anymore.

The morgue was located on the lower level of Hospital Saint-Antoine. Considering it was 11 o’clock at night, half of the lights were off and it gave the space a strange, eerie feeling. If Craig hadn’t just stepped off the elevator with Officer

Claire Laurent of the Paris Police, he might have felt very uncomfortable. But Officer Laurent had been polite and apologetic and willing to meet him even at this hour, so he was appreciative to get this process started so it would be over sooner.

Officer Laurent walked up to the front desk and tapped on the bell at the counter. She waited a moment, heard no stirring, so she tapped it three more times. There was movement in the back, and a voice called, “Un moment.”

A few seconds later, another police officer walked quickly through a pair of swinging doors from the back and approached the counter.

“*Viens avec moi,*” he said quickly and guided Officer Laurent around the counter toward the doors.

Officer Laurent turned to Craig and said, “Give me one moment,” before disappearing into the back.

Craig realized that he forgot to take his phone out of airplane mode when he landed an hour ago, so he pulled his phone out and tapped a few buttons, but his phone had no signal on this floor. He sighed and placed it back into his pocket as Officer Laurent came out. She was speaking French into her radio very quickly, and Craig didn’t catch it all. She approached him and stopped talking into the radio.

“I...” she started, but she stopped and thought about her words for a moment. “Zere has been a...uh...problem.”

“Okay?”

“Ze mortician has lost your sister.”

“Lost? How do you lose a dead body?”

“I don’t yet know how it happened, but ze officer has told me—”

“Wait,” Craig interrupted, “are you sure it was her?”

“Yes,” Officer Laurent said with a confident nod. “We are

zertain eet was her.”

“But you said she was lost?” Craig’s brow furrowed. “Was she moved? Could she have been cremated already?”

Officer Laurent put her hands on Craig’s shoulders and locked eyes with him. “Ze officer has looked into zeveral other options, and she was not moved by anyone on staff. Ze only thing we know is that the body may have been stolen.”

“Stolen? How?”

“We do not yet know, but I would ask zat you stay in ze area for a day or two while we sort zis out.”

Craig’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Okay. What choice do I have?” He needed more cold water to the face. “I need to find a hotel.”

“I will call a taxi for you,” Officer Laurent said as she motioned for Craig to head back to the elevator. She hit the button, and they waited for the elevator car to arrive. “While you are here, you may want to visit ze Radisson Blu Le Metropolitan hotel. Zat is where your sister and her friend had been staying.”

chapter four

Kelsey McIntyre

ZOE HAD NEVER KNOWN this kind of night before. The streets of Paris were shrouded in shadow, but the darkness disintegrated like smoke under her gaze. She saw details at a glance. The dim alleys, the blackness under awnings, the unlit buildings—all revealed themselves to her as readily as if it were day.

The street lamps, on the other hand, were spots of fiery madness. She'd made the mistake of looking directly at them twice. Unpleasant experience. Would not recommend. To be fair, it's probably not great to stare at a lightbulb even if you're not a vampire.

Still, if the lamps were this bad, she hated to think what the sun would do to her when it rose. She had to find somewhere to stay before the night wore off.

She crossed the street to walk on a narrow sidewalk sheltered by a row of parked cars. Normally, if she had to find a place on short notice in a foreign city, she would use her phone, but this time that wasn't an option. She would have to get creative.

The sidewalk ended at an intersection, still busy with cars despite the late hour. A few pedestrians stood outside of a cafe farther down the block, its doors open and lights blazing within, but Zoe hesitated. *I can't just walk up and ask for directions. What if they notice something's wrong with me?* The average person's mind might not jump immediately to "vampire," but "pale dead-looking girl" wasn't much better. It might be better to avoid human contact as far as possible.

Far to her left, she heard something scraping across the pavement. It was darker in that direction, fewer lights, fewer restaurants. Two people were walking in the shadows, talking quietly, dragging a suitcase.

A suitcase. That was a good place to start. Suitcases sometimes lead to hotels. Even from this distance, Zoe's new eyes could make out that the people were wearing bulging backpacks. One of them held a phone, its screen glowing blue as it presumably offered them directions or an address. *Tourists?*

She followed, keeping her distance.

The suspected tourists walked in spurts, pausing ever once in a while to confer over the phone and point at various landmarks. The man held the phone, but the woman glanced around, sometimes looking behind her so that Zoe had to flatten herself up against the buildings or duck into an alley. The couple crossed a street, then turned down another. Finally, they stopped under one of the burning street lamps.

Zoe also stopped, shading her eyes. Were they lost? Was this their destination? To her horror, the people turned around in unison.

"We know you're following us!" the man yelled. He tugged off his backpack and unzipped it, glancing nervously from Zoe to the bag and back. His wife clutched his arm and rolled

the rolling suitcase in front of them like a barricade.

Zoe dove to hide in the nearest doorway. Obviously it was too late. They had seen her. But should she risk approaching? Maybe if she could explain that she meant them no harm, they could help. She was, after all, a petite young woman, the least creepy kind of stalker. *Well, technically I'm a petite young vampire, one of the most creepy kinds of stalkers*, she thought. *But they don't know that.*

She took a deep breath and stepped out from the shadows, hands up in surrender.

Both tourists jumped. "Stay back!" the man said, brandishing his backpack.

"I knew something terrible would happen on this trip," the woman squeaked.

"It's okay," Zoe said, "I just need directions—"

"I doubt that. Don't come any closer." The man frantically fished around in his bag, trying to find whatever he was looking for without taking his eyes off of Zoe.

"We can defend ourselves!" the woman shouted. "We're prepared for anything!"

"No, I'm not going to hurt you, I just—"

"Got it!" the man said, holding a small cylindrical container over his head in triumph.

Zoe could read the label, even in the dark. "Wait, is that *bear spray*?"

The man and woman high-fived each other hastily and then returned to attention. The man removed the bear spray cap. "It's a fresh can and I'm not afraid to use it."

The woman started ticking items off on her fingers, a crazy light in her eyes. "We brought matches, we brought a tarp, we brought maps of every continent. We've got it all."

"To *Paris*?" Zoe said, but then she shook her head. "Never

mind. I don't care. Please, I just need directions to a hotel."

The man lowered the can, just a little. He looked at his wife, and she nodded. "Fine, there's one just around the corner. We're going there now. But you'd better not follow us in there. Just wait outside until we're checked in. Or else..." He gave the can of bear spray a sinister rattle.

Zoe nodded. She felt a little better, strangely. It was nice to know she wasn't the most insane thing in Paris tonight. She waited until the tourists had backed their way around the corner (they watched her the whole time), and then gave them an extra three minutes to get situated inside the hotel before cautiously rounding the corner herself.

The Hotel de l'Arcade shone before her, a beacon in the night.

Zoe winced as her eyes tried to adjust to the hotel lobby. The cream-colored walls, floor, and furniture all blurred together. After the shadowy Paris streets this place was like crawling into the sun.

She crept to the front desk. "I need a room, please." Her voice came out grainy and unfamiliar-sounding, as startling as the brightness of the lights. She squinted at the hotel clerk, but all she could make out was a dark outfit and pale skin that blended in with the rest of the room.

"Of course, miss, and how many nights will you be staying?" It was a male voice.

"Er...four?"

"Four?"

"Yes, that sounds good, thank you." She slid one of her credit cards across the desk. *Act normal, don't make him think you're a vampire. Don't do anything a vampire would do.* She relaxed her squint and had to clench her jaw as pain shot through her exposed eyeballs.

The room slowly came into focus. Potted plants. Fireplace full of charred logs. Elevator. And across the desk, a man whose flesh radiated human heat and cloaked streams of living blood. *Wait—what? What was that? Creepy as all get out, that’s what that was. Stop it.*

“Name, please?” the clerk said.

A jolt of panic ran through her. She couldn’t use her real name; officially, Zoe Evans was dead. Unfortunately, after her run-in with the tourists, only one thing was in her head to use as an alias. “Bear,” she said. “It’s—it’s Bear. Beatrice Bear.”

No. Why.

The man glanced up from his computer screen.

It’s like I’m some weird storybook character.

He arched one eyebrow, ever so slightly, and clicked something on the computer.

You know, Beatrice, the cute stuffed bear no one mentions in the children’s books. Because she’s a vampire.

Zoe cleared her throat. “Yes, it’s spelled B-e-a-r-r-e.” That was better. Hardly suspicious at all now. Way to recover.

“Thank you, Ms. Bearre. Here is your room key. Enjoy your stay.”

Zoe let out her breath and seized the key that he had placed on the counter. “Thank you so much.”

She saw no one else on the way to her room, which was another relief. Maybe things weren’t so bad. She could figure this out. Maybe there was a way to recover from the whole terrible weekend.

The hotel room was beautifully dark. Zoe left it that way and locked the door behind her. Suddenly in a rush, she fumbled to set the room key on the bedside table, pull the quilt off the bed, and stuff one of the faux fur throw pillows under her elbow. As she turned, the pillow caught the edge of

a decorative pot of orchids and swept it off the table.

Her hand had closed around the flowers, halting their descent, before she even realized her arm had moved.

Human Zoe would have broken the flower pot and trodden through the dirt. She probably would have trodden through it several times before noticing what had happened.

These were definitely not her native reflexes.

Don't think about it, you'll freak yourself out. You're already freaked out. She stumbled to corner of the room farthest from the door and sat on the ground with her knees drawn up to her chest. The quilt was big enough to form a cave when she draped it over her head. A cave of darkness. Just what she needed.

Everything will be better in the morning, she told herself, massaging her forehead with her palms. Well, maybe not in the morning. Because dawn. And sunlight. Morning was actually going to make things much, much worse.

But after that, without a doubt, everything was going to be fine.

chapter five

Adela Torres

L'HÔTEL DE L'ARCADE WAS smaller and darker than her previous one, the kind of hotel that had survived the changing fashions by sticking steadfastly to a sort of middle-80's dreariness.

Her room was small, brown, slightly damp. The furnishings felt rickety and ill-fitting. Breathless, like her: a dead room for a dead girl.

She laughed at that, but her laughter sounded cracked and ugly and it scared her. All the novelties of this new, skewed life were scary to her: the mended skin of her corpse-body, that still itched and burned in places. The mystery that was herself (her *self*) absent from the mirror, the familiar image of her gone forever, replaced for a void that made her head dizzy when she looked at the Zoe-less reflection of the room.

She went into the bathroom, avoiding the mirror studiously. Her plan, up to this point, was to sleep, try to get the last hours behind her, recover some semblance of coherent thought process. Her feeling that nothing would be coherent anymore nestled in the back of her brain like a

thorny black tumor.

Nevertheless she got into the shower, trying to cleanse herself physically as well as psychologically. The water was only mildly hot, the pressure nothing to write home about, but nevertheless the jet from the shower hurt her skin. She clenched her teeth and tried to bear it, hoping the scarce heat from the water would get into her bones and help her get rid of this feeling that there were nails piercing her inside.

Weirdly, it didn't hurt; but still she was filled with the sensation of iron, of rust, of all things cold and hard and metal, a chilly nausea made entirely of wrong turns. Everything was a wrong turn.

The towels were scratchy, the usual feeling of relaxation after a shower absent. She turned slowly to the fogged mirror, forcing herself to look at her not-being-there.

She dropped the towel, went to the mirror and rubbed it with a cold forearm. A band of bathroom appeared in the middle of the silvery fog that was the rest of the mirror: ugly beige tiles and half the overused bathtub. There was nothing else there. No-one else.

She put her palm flat against the glass and removed it: a palm print appeared, a bit more of bathroom. Nothing else.

She wrote "ZOE" with two fingers in bold, angry strokes, and then looked at her name for a long time. A drop of water dropped from the corner of the "Z" and left a dark trail behind it, like a tear. Her face would have been in the reflection behind that trail. It wasn't.

She wiped everything with furious strokes of her hand, went back to the bedroom, got dressed in a kind of angry fog. Out of habit, she guessed. In a world without order, all she had left were those decisions, she guessed: what to wear. Where to sleep. How to go on, and who (or *what*) was doing

the going, would have to wait a bit.

She threw herself on the bed and stared at the ceiling for some time, assessing herself.

She wasn't hungry. She wasn't sure she would ever get hungry again. She was thirsty, though, and her mind jumped away from that thought as she physically jerked on the bed. She closed her eyes, curled up on her side and tried to sleep.

She tried for a long time, but her body felt hard and uncomfortable. The pillow was doughy against her cheek, the mattress lumpy and unwelcoming. And she was thirsty.

She got up, went to the sink and drank a glass of water. It tasted like rust and dust bunnies, falling like a lump in her stomach. Something inside her *twisted*, painfully, and her initial plan of just keep drinking water until she was full evaporated. She sat on the bed, rubbing her face and thinking.

Maybe she could go down to the hotel's restaurant, order something light. A salad. Maybe a bowl of soup. She tried to conjure the smell and taste of some delicious *soupe a l'oignon*, make herself *want* it.

She barely got to the toilet in time. The water she had just drunk came out of her in a lukewarm, yellowish viscous jet.

She knelt, spitting, coughing and drooling into the toilet bowl for a while until all the weird, flat taste of the vomit was gone. Her whole body was shaken by small tremors. She was so thirsty now: her throat felt raw and dry, the inside of her mouth parched and scratchy to her tongue's exploration.

She forced herself to take another mouthful of water, but she couldn't even swallow it. The attempt made her retch and she spit it out almost immediately.

Now her head also hurt. She didn't feel hot, but it was like she had a fever, a displacement of her whole body that made her *want* fiercely. She wanted to stop having a headache. She

wanted to stop hurting. She *wanted* to stop the nausea that seemed to have installed itself inside her like a dying pigeon looking for shelter. Above all else, she wanted to *drink*. If only she could not be thirsty anymore everything else would be all right, she was sure.

Then she was in the street. Not sure how she had gotten there. A part of her brain that —she suspected— had not died fully yet made her check her pockets for her hotel room card key. Yes: she had it with her.

It wasn't cold, or at least it didn't feel cold to her; but her body was so buggy at this point that she didn't trust it. She watched the people around her and judged that it was a bit chilly, so she buttoned up her jacket. A few moments later she pulled up her hood.

At first she simply walked. It seemed to warm her up a little, but soon the thirst went front and center again in her brain. She tried to distract herself from it looking around at shops (most of them closed at this hour). Then she tried looking at restaurants (most of them open at this hour) but the smell made her sick. She gravitated, a bit on purpose and a bit directed by the absence of smells, towards a less-populated part of the city. Mostly residential buildings, some of them narrow and old and quaint and looking uncomfortable as a place to live; other more modern, with reinforced glass doors and plain façades.

One of the doors opened, flooding the relatively dim street with crisp, white LED light. Zoe stopped dead on her tracks, right by the corner. A man came out, closed the door behind him and started walking ahead of her.

Zoe looked at his retreating back: not old, maybe mid-thirties. Short, slightly pudgy, curly light brown hair already balding topside. He walked leisurely, like someone enjoying a

stroll. He didn't have a phone on his hand, and he obviously hadn't come out for a late jog around the block. Zoe started walking after him.

She didn't have any particular aim in mind, or at least that's what she told herself. She passed him, receiving nothing more than a cursory glance. Then she saw an alley opening to her left and she went there and when he passed she reached out and took him by the collar and yanked him in.

It was easy, like pulling a kitten from a pant leg. She turned on one heel, pushed him against the wall a bit farther inside the alley, and put her hand on his neck. It felt *incredibly* warm. She pressed her other arm across his chest, pinning him to the wall. Surprisingly, he didn't fight; or it didn't do him any good.

The man let out a gasp and a kind of gurgle. It could have been a French swearword, but she wasn't really paying attention right now because other, very interesting things were happening to her.

Firstly, she was salivating. Profusely. Her mouth was instantly coated with a warm, sweet-tasting saliva that felt like the best of wines to her. And her gums suddenly hurt: a lancing, hot pain, like spikes piercing her maxilla. But it only lasted for a second and then her tongue touched two obstacles on its way out. Two pointy, strong obstacles. She let out a sort of purring sigh that was so much like sexual anticipation that the man stopped his struggles for a second.

Not that it mattered at this point: Zoe felt great. She was hungry like she hadn't been since she was little and used to sit down to a hearty homemade meal after a long summer day playing in the sun. There was a smell in the air that simply yelled "food" at her. No: "ambrosia". That's what it yelled. And she wanted it. All her aches and hurts had disappeared within the flood of happy anticipation that this hunger

brought with it. This was going to be great.

The part of her brain that was —maybe—not yet dead was screaming, but the rest of Zoe found her target cheerfully: there, the side of the neck, where the heat was greatest, where the smell was strongest. She steadied his head with her hand, buried her face in his neck and nuzzled it for a second or two, looking for the exact spot, positioning her lips, her nose. Her breathing was loud now, and each exhalation came with a sort of growl.

She bit.

The skin offered resistance at first and the man wriggled and flopped, but Zoe simply pressed harder with arms and teeth. She broke through the skin and there was a moment of perfect, absolute pleasure as a warm liquid filled her mouth and made every cell in her body sing. It was amazing. It was delicious. It tasted better than anything she had ever tasted. It was like drinking the essence of strength and confidence and charisma, a magical potion that made her whole, powerful, beautiful.

She swallowed, and the incredible feeling went down along with the blood, warm and healing, easing her aches and pains and making her relax from the inside out as she took a gulp, two, three. Her thirst diminished, then disappeared. Still she wanted more.

Then she realized: she was on her knees. Her teeth were still in the man's neck, and the man had collapsed against the wall. He was sitting, gasping, not struggling. She noticed another smell mixed with the awesome smell of blood: urine.

She stopped and disengaged her new, beautiful fangs from his neck. She saw the two deep puncture wounds and also the red, angry area between and around them, where her mouth and teeth had pressed hard, suckling and biting. Blood welled

inside the wounds and started flowing out. Instinctively she licked it: a shiny film of saliva covered the wounds and the bleeding slowed significantly. Zoe would have said something, uttered an interested "Huh" at least, but she was still reeling from the experience.

The man seemed in shock. A dark stain on his trousers and a small puddle on the dirty pavement explained the smell of fresh urine. Zoe took one of his hands, put it against the wounded side of his neck, pressed it there.

"*Desolée,*" she said, summoning all of her French to her. "*Merci. Merci beaucoup.*"

She still wanted more. But it had been all too much, too fast, and she needed to breathe, to process. And, yes, to digest.

She had lost track of time; it felt late in the night, but how late, she had no idea. Was dawn near? She felt strong now, but would she stand it? Could she? Zoe left the man where he was and turned on her tracks, hoping to remember the way to her hotel.

chapter six

E Kinna

ZOE OPENED HER EYES to see faint light leaking through a gap in the drapes, and she remembered everything that had happened since the attack with painful clarity. Looking at the sunlight she wondered if the old myths about vampires were true. Would she burn or turn to dust if she touched it? Well, she wasn't about to try it without someone standing by with a blanket and fire extinguisher.

She'd already learned that one common myth was true when she had seen no reflection in a mirror, but what about pictures? What would a camera show? Zoe reached for the nightstand and took her phone for a selfie.

Click. Click. Click.

She took pictures from several angles, but nothing. Each photo showed an empty bed, though there was an indent in the pillow—a rumpled and pathetic kind of 'Kilroy was here'. No more cute and over posed selfies to plaster all over social media, like the ones she'd posted upon arrival in France.

Tears stung her eyes as memories of Kate and the pain of her loss bubbled to the surface, but Zoe pushed it away and

focused instead on what she could remember of vampire myths and tropes.

The whole thing was surreal, and it made her feel vulnerable for the first time in years. Even though it was possible she might not have to worry about death from old age and disease anymore, what about silver bullets. Or, was that werewolves? And what about crosses, holy water, and garlic? Weren't they like vampire kryptonite?

Zoe opened the browser on her phone and started searching the internet for answers. Wikipedia, of course, was the first link, followed by a few encyclopedia entries and vampire enthusiast blogs. Most sources agreed that the stories of vampires go back thousands of years. Some believed the biblical Lilith was the first, others said vampires came from sorcery in ancient Egypt. Some sources said they were demons, others thought vampires were poor souls cursed by a witch.

Moving past the origin myths, she found information on vampire abilities. Some sites wrote that vampires could fly and shape-shift into wolves or bats, but they were contradicted by other sites that said no, they couldn't. The more she read, the more confused she became, and the more determined to figure things out for herself.

But how? Taking selfies was one thing, jumping out of the hotel window to test her flying skills would be beyond stupid. So, she contemplated the idea of trying out shapeshifting. What would be so bad about changing into an animal in the privacy of her hotel room? Well, a wolf to be specific, because she thought that bats were just ugly.

Closing her eyes, Zoe concentrated hard, visualizing her body morphing and shifting into the form of a majestic black wolf. Nothing happened. With a sigh, she tried again, this time

visualizing herself transforming into a tiny bat. Again, nothing. *Okay, either I'm doing it wrong or I can chalk one up for the site that said no shapeshifting.*

Reading on, she learned that the only sure way to kill a vampire was with fire, or preferably with a stake to the heart or decapitation. “Well, no shit Sherlock”, she muttered, “those methods would kill anyone, vampire or not.”

So, what about holy water, she wondered. Finding a church seemed like a good idea until she imagined her hand smoking and burning in the holy water font, while the midnight mass congregation rose up to light the torches and grab the pitchforks. *Yeah, maybe I should just steer clear of churches for now.*

Deciding that crosses might be safer to test, but not having one available, she walked to the desk beside the bed and opened the drawer to find the next best thing. With a deep breath she put her hand on the complimentary bible. Nothing happened. *Hmm, she thought, maybe holy relics aren't going to be my kryptonite after all.*

Unsatisfied by the lack of definitive answers from her experiments, Zoe ran another web search on her phone. This time she searched for local libraries where she hoped there might be some better sources to check, but the few she found were closed until morning.

Next, she searched for occult bookstores, believing that they would likely have lots of books on vampirism. There were several listings, but only one appeared to be within walking distance:

La Boutique Ésotérique

Achat et Vente de livres rares

Médiums et Chiromancie

Zoe entered the words into a translation app on her phone: The Esoteric Boutique, buying and selling rare books, psychics

and palm reading.

“Sounds like as good a place as any,” she said aloud while grabbing her purse and putting on a light jacket. “Hopefully, they’ll have something good on vampirism.”

Thirty minutes later, Zoe pressed on the shopworn handle of a glass door with a golden palm and Eye of Ra outlined in purple glitter. Jingling bells preceded a wafting wave of acrid sweetness that made her nose twitch from the blend of patchouli, Egyptian sandalwood, and another scent she couldn’t identify.

Once inside, the deep melody of ethereal, orchestral arrangements and Tibetan Singing Bowls drifted louder. It was a sensory onslaught of incense, music, colors, and textures. Zoe didn’t know where to look first. Nearby tables were draped in velvet black to highlight glittering crystal and tumbled stones of Amethyst, Aquamarine, Onyx, Turquoise, and too many more to mention.

A clerk, wizened with age, entered from a back room and offered a radiant smile. She had to be over sixty, but a purple-blue, tie-dyed headband tamed her frizzy, white curls in a way that made her seem younger than Zoe felt at more than half her age. The fabric matched her flowing, gypsy dress, and gold and amber bangles chinkled and clinked with the arm sweeping welcome.

Zoe picked up a stone and gave a nod to the woman while glancing around. Eyes were on her, watching. She rubbed a black onyx gem between her thumb and forefinger, before tossing it back on the pile. Nothing in the store looked like it had anything to do with Vampires, least of all the old gypsy lady.

“Bonsoir! Est-ce que je peux vous aider? Can I help you?”

The clerk's French accented English was melodic, even soothing.

"I'm not sure."

"Are you interested in anything in particular?"

"Yes, thank you, I'm here to...well, actually, do you have any books about vampires? It's my friend's birthday tomorrow and he has a thing for them."

As she lied, Zoe realized that she wasn't just embarrassed to be asking about books on vampires, she was afraid that someone might realize she was one.

"Oui, bien sûr...of course. It is a most popular subject. Est-ce que vous parlez français?"

"Pardon?"

"Never mind. I was just wondering if you spoke French, as our selection of books in English is un peu limité...sorry, I meant to say, it's a bit limited."

"That's okay. Would I be able to look through what you do have?"

"Oui." The gypsy clerk ran her hands over some of the books on a nearby shelf, taking down three bound in leather and handing them to Zoe. "Voilà, mademoiselle! These are excellent and quite rare. Worthy gifts for a discerning collector or enthusiast." She gestured for Zoe to sit at an empty desk. "Please, have a look, and you are free to take your time."

Zoe spent the next hour flipping through the books, growing more frustrated with each new page. One author, a Van Helsing wannabe, talked about how he had stabbed flying, fanged she-demons through their breasts with one thrust of his thick wooden stake, in a way that made Zoe think the guy was more interested in writing about some deviant vampire sex fetish, than actual vampire mythology.

Next, a more contemporary tome stated that vampires

could not fly nor could they shape-shift, but they could manipulate certain elements like wind and fog. Closing her eyes, Zoe focused her mind on the air outside the shop, willing it to coalesce into a wild wind. After several minutes, she opened one eye to peek at the window. Not so much a breeze ruffled the trees lining the street. *Well, either I really suck at this vampire powers thing, or that's strike two.*

The last book was a study of the parallels between myth and science, theorizing that diseases like porphyria and rabies were misunderstood in ancient times and led to the vampire myth. The former made people sensitive to sunlight, the latter caused people to bite and even sometimes be repulsed by garlic. It was a good theory that didn't help Zoe because she wasn't rabid, nor did she have porphyria. She was still no closer to understanding vampires than she had been an hour ago.

"Madame," Zoe raised her arm to catch the clerk's attention, "pardon me, but do you have anything with more... err...facts?"

The woman frowned when she turned around to answer. "I will check, but...are you feeling okay, Chérie? You look a bit pale."

A sharp chill ran up Zoe's spine as she watched the woman's frown deepen. *Shit!* she thought, and looked down at her hands, which did seem whiter than normal but not in an obvious 'I'm a bloodsucking freak' kind of way. After a few seconds, logic returned and Zoe took a deep breath. There's no way the woman could know she was a vampire just because of pale skin. "Thank you, yes I'm fine. I'm just tired", Zoe said. "So, do have any other books?"

"No...these are the best that I have. Will they not do for your friend?"

Zoe shook her head. “No, he’s looking for something...err...quite specific. Perhaps one of the books in French?” Though Zoe didn’t read or write French, maybe the old lady would be nice enough to translate.

The gypsy lady stared at Zoe with a curious expression for a minute before moving to look at another bookshelf. “Ah oui, la voici...here it is,” she selected a black, leather bound book that looked older than the others. “There is no English translation but there are many beautiful illustrations,” she said, and then, the woman’s face lit up with a grin. “Bon! I know, we will look through it together and then I will give you a free reading.”

“Oh no,” Zoe protested as she stood up, “thank you...but I couldn’t.” It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate the old lady’s kindness, she just didn’t want to waste any more time.

“Mais oui! Yes, I promise you will be pleased. I am much better than any of those cheap fortune tellers one finds on the streets of London.”

Torn between being polite and refusing the woman’s offer, Zoe chose the former. She could hear her mother’s ghost scolding her from beyond at even the thought of being rude to someone elder, and it made Zoe cringe on instinct.

“Oh no, there is no reason to be afraid, Chérie!” The woman laughed as she led Zoe to a black velvet covered table, sat down, and lit a hand-dipped beeswax candle; its smoke was sweet, like honey.

Zoe opened her mouth to explain she wasn’t frightened of a reading but decided it would take too long. The sooner she got out of there, the better.

“Bon,” the gypsy said once they were both seated, and then she opened the book. “The monk scribe who wrote this manuscript in the sixteenth century claims that vampires were

ancient demons. He referred to them as the Devil's Immortals and claimed that he had learned how to summon them, which he did to try and find a way to exorcise them."

"You mean exorcism, like in the movies?"

The gypsy lady shrugged. "I suppose, though it is unclear if he was successful. He did, however, claim that he learned a great deal about them from speaking to those he summoned."

"Did he record what he learned? How did he summon them? Does it say anything about vampire weaknesses or abilities?" Zoe felt a surge of excitement and hope that all the answers she needed were about to be revealed. Better yet, maybe this old book could teach her how to summon herself a good old vampire mentor.

"Patience, Chérie," the woman said. "The monk's writing is not easy to follow, and I am certain he was quite mad."

Zoe clasped her hands on the table and leaned forward. "But, does he say how he summoned them?"

"Not that I can see, but he did write about finding a kind of oracle, or ancient well of knowledge. Maybe examining the drawings will help. There was one I remember that..."

"Where? Show me, please." Zoe interrupted as her hands clasped tighter and she resisted the urge to snatch the book.

As if reading Zoe's mind, the woman turned the pages faster until she found what she was looking for. "Ah, yes. What do you think?"

It was a beautiful hand drawn image in black ink. An artist's rendition of silver moors and pale clouds swirling past a winter's moon, where its ghostly glow cast shadows from large bats flying over a Neolithic stone circle. Inside the circle, a woman in black, hooded garb stood at the center between two stone pillars. Her reflection was absent in the pool of water at her feet.

“Could that be the oracle the monk wrote about?” Zoe asked.

“This is strange,” the gypsy woman said, looking at the page.

“What’s strange?”

“The drawing, it has changed.”

“Changed how?”

“See the figure there in the circle? I remember it being a man, not a woman, and I remember the pool had his reflection.”

Zoe ran her fingertips over the lithograph and imagined being there, wondering what the scene represented. A second later, she blinked and transported somewhere else. To be precise, she now found herself smack in the middle of a stone circle that was bathed in a halo of moonlight.

Shaking her head, Zoe looked down at the strange black robe she now seemed to be wearing. At her feet was a pool of water, that did not cast her reflection. *What the hell is this? Some kind of hallucination? Damn it, I knew there was something odd about that crazy old lady. I bet she put something in the incense...*

“So, you have summoned me, witch. To what purpose?”

Someone or something had spoken to her from the shadows. It sounded like a man, but she couldn’t see a form. His voice was deep and resonant, and he seemed impatient, or irritated, or both.

“I’m not a witch.” Zoe heard the flapping wings and felt a rush of wind. “Bloody hell,” she shouted. On instinct, she threw her arms over her head and flinched before looking up. *Bats, of course there would have to be bats.*

“What are you then?” A shadow seemed to move closer, and the voice seemed more curious now than irritated.

“I don’t know...well, that is to say, I’m not sure.”

“Interesting.”

Zoe felt a presence, a palpable dark that threatened to envelop her entire being. She took a step back and whispered. “Well, this is one helluva hallucination. Time to snap out of it.” She pinched her arm hard, expecting to wake up, but nothing happened.

“You wish to leave,” he said, “without asking what you so desperately want to know?”

His voice felt like a caress, and his words a seduction. Zoe’s eyes fluttered shut and she felt her body leaning towards the mysterious shadow. “If I ask, would you tell me?”

“No.”

“But, why?” The refusal made her eyes snap open and her posture stiffen. “Aren’t you some kind of oracle?”

“I will not answer because you want it so badly.” He laughed.

“Then you are a demon. You enjoy tormenting people.”

“I can be such a creature if you desire.”

“No! If you aren’t an oracle and you aren’t a demon, then what are you?”

“What would you like me to be, little vamp?”

So, whoever or whatever this was, knew that she was a vampire. That was good, but how in God’s name could a disembodied voice be so damn seductive? Zoe wasn’t sure whether to keep asking for answers, or just shed her panties. Instead, she said, “In that case, I’d like you to be a vampire so you can teach me everything I need to know.”

“Hmm...I could, but then you would miss out on the fun of discovering it all on your own.”

“I can live with the disappointment, trust me.”

“Alas, as much as it pains me to deny the request of such a beautiful and willing woman, it is the one thing that I will not

do.”

Zoe felt her cheeks grow hot, both at the realization that he knew she found him sexy and being called beautiful by a being that had probably seen thousands or even millions of women over the ages. That flattery wasn’t enough to tamp down her frustration at being denied however, and she replied, “But, why? Have I done something wrong?”

“It is a very long story but suffice to say that I once shared such knowledge with a rather likeable and persuasive monk, and I have lived to regret it as it cost many innocent lives.”

Wondering what it was the monk had done, she said, “What did he do? No wait...it doesn’t matter. Whatever it was, I promise I won’t do anything bad. I just want to know what I’m supposed to do or not do.”

The shadow started to move away, and an empty chill took its place around Zoe’s body. She shivered and moved to follow, but it started to withdraw even faster.

“You have been a welcome diversion, little Zoe.”

“Wait,” she cried, “don’t go, please. Can’t you tell me something, anything?”

“I will tell you only this: You will find all the answers you seek but be careful where you seek to find them. We shall not meet again.”

Zoe closed her eyes against a bright flash, and when she opened them again, she was back at the table in the occult shop. The old woman was fanning Zoe’s face with the book.

“Bon, you are alright,” the woman sank back in her chair and put down the book, “I thought you were going to faint.”

“No...I...I’m fine,” she said, and then glared at the gypsy, “but really, you should warn people before giving them hallucinations.”

“You are mistaken, Chérie.” The woman gave Zoe a

sideways glance and said, "I merely showed you some books."

"Right...nothing at all funny about the incense in here, is there?" Zoe shot back. "Now, about the book...how much?"

"Which one," the woman asked.

"This one," Zoe gestured to the table, only to see that the black leather-bound book written by the monk was no longer there, in its place were the three books she'd looked at earlier.

"Wait, what happened to the monk's book?"

"I have no idea which one you mean, Chérie."

Zoe gritted her teeth. "Enough, stop calling me that and just..." As she spoke, she noticed a pale band of purple twilight splashed across the horizon. The sun was rising, she was out of time. "Damn it!"

"Is something wrong?"

"Tomorrow. I'll be back tomorrow, and I want that book. Zoe ran out the door, but afraid she wouldn't make it back to the hotel in time on foot, she hailed a taxi.

Back in the safety of her hotel room, Zoe sank on the bed, her mind still racing from the bizarre experience at the shop. Too exhausted to make sense of it all she closed her eyes. Her last thoughts as she drifted to sleep were of a gypsy woman laughing in a patchouli scented bookstore, and the voice of a seductive shadow fading away as though they had never been there at all.

chapter seven

Julia Pierce

SITTING ALONE IN HER room, Zoe struggled to think about her situation without panicking. Clearly - though unbelievably - she was a vampire. But what did that mean? Vague memories of films flitted through her mind. *Twilight*, *Dracula*... from what she could remember, both seemed to contradict each other while also being absolutely wrong about the finer details of her new state. Okay, she might still be in the early stages, but there wasn't any sign of her developing super speed or super strength, which was really disappointing - and the reflection thing was just plain weird. So much for *Twilight*'s stupid glittering, too - her aversion to sunlight was extreme.

She really needed help in figuring things out - but here she was, stuck in a room in a foreign country and a C at GCSE French wasn't exactly going to be much use if someone exposed her secret. Besides, the curriculum hadn't included the French term for "creature of the night". It was hard to see who she could turn to. Searching online brought up piles of nonsense based largely on superstition. Oh - and her best friend was dead. Kate wouldn't have been much help with the

practicalities of living like this, but at least she would have been *there* for her.

Outside, the sun was starting to dim, meaning she'd be able to go out soon. Not that she had any plans of where to go, or even what she was looking for. Maybe some sort of expert - but in what? She wondered if anyone else was in the same situation. Vampires in books and films always had a nest. Okay, that might be another myth made up to fill seats in the cinema at Halloween, but surely she wasn't the only vampire in France? There had to be more about... but how would you go about finding someone living a secret life in a city you didn't know, using a language you barely understood? One thing was for certain, she wouldn't find many answers stuck in this room.

Her phone told her there was still 20 minutes until sunset, so she idly flicked through the pictures in the copy of the Paris Metro she'd picked up the day before. Depressingly, it was filled with adverts for daytime activities she'd never now be able to do. Then in the small ads, something caught her eye.

"Louis Raymond, private detective - all mysteries solved. English and French spoken, open 10am to 10pm, 12b étage 1, Rue Favart. Tel: 01 57 89 36 29".

That sounded perfect - no language barrier, late opening, and she could pay him to take her seriously - because she knew exactly how crazy her story would sound. She just hoped he wasn't too expensive.

Opening her computer, she brought up Raymond's address. Rue Favart was in the neighbouring 2nd arrondissement, around 15 -20 minutes' walk away. Okay, the route was through the local theatre-land and was busy, but as she'd only just become what she now was, she still looked

healthy enough to pass as a standard human. The burning desire to feed had also settled down, so a crowded pavement wouldn't be too much of a challenge. She debated whether to call first to check if the detective was in, but decided against it - this wasn't the sort of thing that you could explain over the phone; he'd probably send over a psychiatric team, which would be a completely reasonable response, given what she had to say.

The sun was well and truly gone now, so Zoe set off towards Place de la Madeleine, then up through the crowds assembling outside the Gaumont Opéra, ready for that night's shows. As she pushed through them, it dawned on her that perhaps there was a little truth in some of the mad internet lore. Her sense of smell was definitely sharper than before, and as she rounded the corner towards her final destination, she found herself mentally categorising passing people into those who would taste good, and those who... The thought of drinking blood again repulsed her, and she tried to push it from her mind.

The detective's office was up a flight of slightly grubby stairs behind a deceptively smart looking door. A glass pane bearing the legend 'Raymond' marked out his office; the door was unlocked, so she stepped inside and waited next to the empty desk for his receptionist to return. Seconds later, a man's head poked through from the inner room:

'Je n'ai pas de réceptionniste. Entrez!'" Then, on seeing her confusion, he added: "No receptionist. Come on in - you'd prefer English, right?" Zoe nodded.

"Okay, cool - I'm Louis Raymond, Raymond to most people. The accent's Canadian, so please don't ever call me an American. How can I help you?"

Zoe took a deep breath. "Okay, so... this story is going to

sound odd. You're a detective, and I'm sure I'm right in thinking you've seen lots of strange things in your time, but... this one is really, really strange. And it happened to me, which wasn't great... Anyway I'm just rambling and trying to prepare you here - I can't believe it myself... Oh, first though, what's your hourly rate?"

"€100 an hour for simple surveillance; more if the job gets complex. But we don't need to get into that just yet - you haven't told me what you're looking for."

Zoe got out her purse and laid an hour's worth of Euros on the table.

"Okay, so if I put thither, then that means you have to listen to me."

"Well - it's not that simple, but it does make me more inclined to do so, yes."

"Okay, that's good."

Raymond listened, professionally expressionless, as Zoe's story poured out - first Kate, then the morgue and on to the end of her transformation.

"Wait now," he interrupted, as she briefly paused. "Who put you up to this? Is it some sort of joke? Because wasting my time is pretty hilarious, obviously. The first bit sounded like a great story, but when you got to the feeding bit was pretty gross and stupid, frankly... you need to try harder,"

"Honestly," said Zoe, jumping to her feet. "It happened. It really did. I know how it sounds, I do. I really do." A tear rolled down her cheek. "But - wait! I can prove it; I can show you I didn't just make this up. Do you have a bathroom with a mirror here?"

"Really? Okay, you know what? Sure," he said, sighing and pushing back his chair. "I have literally no clue what you're trying to pull, but I have nothing better on tonight - so - let's

go see the mirror and its secrets. And, “ he added with bored resignation,”if you’re thinking of attacking me, just be sure to know I’m twice your size and there’s no money here.”

He showed Zoe into a bathroom in the hall.

“Okay, go ahead with whatever...”

Zoe pushed past Raymond and stood in front of the mirror. “Fine. What can you see?”

Raymond seemed to wake up. “Okay, still seeing a trick. How are you do that?”

“I’m not doing anything. My reflection’s just gone. It’s part of... the thing, I suppose. That I just told you about.”

Looking confused, Raymond walked back to his office.

“So, presuming you’re not a magician and you’re not doing this for fun, what would you like me to do?”

“I want to find out if there are any others... like me. Out there. In Paris. But I don’t speak the language and I don’t know where to start looking. That was going be your job. I’ll pay.” She drew out a pile of banknotes.

“I’d hope so,” remarked Raymond. “Look... okay, against my better judgement I’ll see what I can do. Payment is five hours upfront, and I have a contract.” He pulled a document from in his drawer. “Sign this.”

Zoe reached for his heavy silver pen, then pulled her fingers back screaming, as the smell of burning flesh seeped into the room.

“Are you okay? That’s... unusual, to say the least,” Raymond said, examining her. “Silver’s generally pretty hypoallergenic.”

She clutched her hand to her body as he fetched her a wet cloth for her wound.

“So,” he said, thoughtfully. “We could do with finding out if... *if*... you’re right, and you’ve changed as a result of your...

attack, what does this mean? What else causes a reaction?” He pulled out his phone and took a selfie of them both.

“What are you doing? This isn’t the time for taking stupid snaps - I’m in pain!”

“Look,” he said. The photo showed nothing except him.

Zoe sighed. “To be honest, not much more can surprise me today. It makes sense - with the mirror as well. Ugh.”

“Look,” said Raymond. “There will be more things - if you’re right about what’s happened to you. We could try them? For your safety. In a controlled environment, to prevent you getting into trouble later.”

“No thanks! Look at the state of my fingers.” Zoe uncurled her hand to display raw, blackened patches on the two digits where the silver had touched. “I’m not going through that again. I’m going home - to my hotel, where I’m safe. Look, here’s 500 Euros - please - find me some answers while I find a pharmacy.”

Raymond shrugged, pulling out a laptop. “Suit yourself.”

Leaving him to get to work, Zoe headed for the street.

chapter eight

Astrid Stevens

THE RUE FAVART SEEMED eerily quiet when Zoe left the building. The street was like a ghost town, surrounded by and separate from the ambient traffic noise of Paris, punctuated by raucous youthful revelry a street or two away. It looked less attractive in the dark. Bags of rubbish were stacked outside the closed commercial premises, and at both ends of the street the distinctive Parisian architecture of the 2nd Arrondissement was cloaked in scaffolding and protective screening for the extensive property renovations that appeared to be underway.

Zoe looked up and down the Rue Favart, wondering what to do next. €3,000 was a steep price for Raymond to ask, but at least she did have the money, so she could afford it. At the last count, there had been something like £4,000 left in her savings account. Even after paying Raymond, there would still be enough money for weekend trips like this, should her life ever get back to normal. Or *not* like this — please, let there be no more trips like this!

So what she needed, first and foremost, was a bank. Zoe

checked that she still had her bank card safe, and found Kate's bank card with it. Poor Kate. What a terrible way to go. Zoe cried silently for a moment or two, then choked back her tears and tried to steel herself into action.

There must be a bank near here, somewhere. She could go to the hole-in-the-wall, and withdraw the cash, then come straight back to give Raymond his fee. But wasn't there a limit to the amount of cash you could withdraw from an ATM? She had a vague idea that her maximum was £300 per day. In Euros, at today's rate, that would be... well, pretty nearly €300, actually, by the time she accounted for the currency exchange fees. The exchange rate had gone to the dogs. And £300 converted to Euros was nowhere near enough, even if she counted in the €100 that she had in cash.

What she *really* needed wasn't a bank, then, but a plan. Zoe walked along the side of the Opéra Comique, then round the corner into the Place Boieldieu. She sat down on the white steps of the well-lit frontage of the opera house to consider her options, in front of a sandwich board reading "*Gala de levée de fonds. Ce soir. Ici.*", and in smaller print at the bottom, "*Costumé?*". The entrance doors were open, and muted ripples of applause radiated through them at intervals. Must be some sort of charity event, Zoe thought. Even in her distracted state, she found her professional eye drawn to the graphic design of the poster, which depicted a glittering snake wrapped around a rod of gold against a backdrop of crumpled purple velvet. Some sort of medical charity, maybe.

So, what exactly were her options? First, scope the problem. Cash in hand: €100, give or take. Cash in bank: £4,000, or thereabouts. Access to cash in bank: £300, nominally. Deficit: €2,600, estimated. Deadline for coming up with the full €3,000: as soon as possible, but basically tonight,

or at least before sunrise.

Zoe sighed deeply. This seemed hopeless. But there had to be a solution.

Plan A. Go to the cash machine, and use her bank card to withdraw up to the daily limit. At £300 per day, that would take her a full ten days to get what she needed, and there simply wasn't time for that. She couldn't go on like this for ten days. Where would she stay? How would she live? (Was she actually living? Was that the right word?) Besides, wouldn't using the cash machine reveal not only that she was still alive and had not been killed, but that she was at this specific location? That wouldn't be a good idea. And the cash machine would have security cameras recording her withdrawal, like on that *Hunted* programme where volunteers went on the run and a team of "hunters" tracked them down through simulated use of routine surveillance systems. No, on reflection, withdrawing cash was definitely a very bad idea. Plan A was not a goer.

Plan B. There was no Plan B. Where on earth could somebody get such a huge sum of money, in Paris, at this time of night?

Oh, blast.

Wild ideas ran through Zoe's mind. She could smash a shop window, steal something valuable, then sell it to someone and use the proceeds to pay Raymond. But she didn't know how to find someone to sell stolen goods to, never mind how to break in through the security shutters and alarm systems that she expected were standard fittings in Paris shops as they were at home.

Or she could steal a vehicle, then sell that... but again, to whom? How do you find a fence at short notice, and especially in a foreign city? How do you find a fence at all, anywhere?

Or she could phone Craig and ask her big brother to bail her out. That idea was worth considering further. Craig would help, she was sure, although she didn't immediately know how he could get money to her before dawn. If he didn't know she was dead, how would she explain her sudden and urgent need for large amounts of cash in the middle of the night? And what if the French police had already contacted her next of kin and told Craig that she was dead? Did he know that her body had gone missing from the morgue? If he did know she was dead, how could she possibly ring him, out of the blue?

As she pondered on the impossibilities that would need to be overcome, a car hurtled round the corner and screeched to a juddering halt in front of her. Two young men in balaclavas and hoodies leapt from the car and ran from the square in diagonally opposite directions to each other, leaving the car doors open. This seemed odd. Zoe stood up, and heard police sirens blaring. She backed away from the car, moving up the steps of the opera house to stand warily next to an entrance pillar, ready to dart inside to safety.

Three — no, four — police cars screamed into the square, and *les flics* poured out. Some circled in on the abandoned car cautiously, weapons at the ready. Three ran into the entrance of the Opéra Comique, shouting what Zoe translated to mean “Everybody out! Emergency! Bomb alert!”, although her school French was rusty and she wasn't sure if she'd understood correctly.

In seconds, the opera house was in uproar. Streams of people in fancy dress poured from the three front doors of the building, fleeing the threat of modern terrorism in incongruous costumes from across the centuries. Zoe stood back to let them pass into the Place Boieldieu, where they were ushered to right and left, keeping close to the building and as

far from the car as possible, then herded down the neighbouring side streets to safety.

As the rush of exiting concert-goers thinned, Zoe wondered what to do next. If it really was a bomb, was it a threat to her? Could a vampire be killed, other than through the special vampire-killing measures described in films and books? At the back of her mind, she thought that she could now be killed only by something like a stake through the heart, or a silver bullet, or eating an overdose of extra-garlicky *aioli*. How would running away help, and where would she run to? She made a snap decision, slipped unnoticed into the entrance lobby of the opera house, and crouched behind a marble plinth bearing an alabaster statue of Carmen, to one side of a majestic marble staircase sweeping upward. And there she waited, until the last stragglers ran past her, and the diminishing sounds of panic had faded to silence.

Or near silence. The doors of the theatre were still open, and she could hear the police shouting at each other in words that she didn't understand, although she recognised some profanities from her many hours of watching imported police dramas on BBC 4.

As soon as the coast was clear, Zoe scampered quickly up the stairs, and found herself in a magnificent foyer with parquet floor, painted scenes adorning walls and ceiling, and luxuriously ornate gilt-work. Then another foyer, with marble mosaics on floor and walls. And, at last, the auditorium, resplendent in red velvet and still more twiddly gold paint. In each room, Zoe gazed in awe at the breathtaking beauty and extravagance of the decoration. And when she reached the auditorium, and turned her eyes from the ceiling to the boxes and galleries, then to the seating around her, she gazed in awe at something else.

A plastic bucket, to be exact, which had been cast aside in its bearer's flight from the theatre, and which now lay on the floor with money spilling out from it. There were coins and a few notes on the carpet. Quite a few notes.

Zoe moved towards it, looked over each shoulder, then quickly scooped the spilt money back into the bucket and picked it up. She looked around. In the aisle, she could see several more discarded buckets, at intervals of a few rows. They must have been passing the bucket along the rows to collect charity donations from the audience during the fund-raising gala. And then she felt a bright spark of an idea explode into her consciousness. She needed money. Here was money. She could "borrow" this money to pay Raymond then, later, get in touch with the gala organisers and arrange to transfer the same sum money from her bank account to their charity fund. It wasn't stealing. More of an IOU. She pushed to the back of her mind the niggling concern that banks don't transfer money from dead people's accounts without seeing proof of some sort of legal authority to do so. That could all be sorted out later. For now, she had an answer.

There were half a dozen buckets, in all, and Zoe tipped their contents into the one that she had first picked up. It was close to overflowing, but it all just about fitted in. However, much of the content seemed to be sheets of paper, which was worrying.

In preparation for possible interruption if people should return to the building, she carried the bucket upstairs, and went into one of the private boxes, closing and locking the door behind her, then sat on the floor, the balcony of the box shielding her from any possible sighting from below.

She tipped out the bucket contents onto the carpet, and sorted separate piles of notes and coins for each different

denomination. By far the largest pile was the folded paper slips, which turned out to be promises of bank transfers and regular payments — very generous promises, in many cases. However, those were of no use to her, and nor were the handful of foreign coins that weren't legal tender in France. In terms of executing her plan, it was disappointing to see how relatively small a percentage of the funds raised by the gala event were in usable cash.

After a lot of counting and some re-counting, Zoe had reached a total of just over €2,800, which she put back into the bucket, using the coins to weigh down the notes and prevent them from escaping. It was nearly, but not quite, enough to cover Raymond's fee, if you took into account her own €100 in cash.

Should she try asking Raymond if he would take less than the full three thousand? Better not. She'd need to think again and come up with an idea to fill the gap. But she really didn't want to use her own bank card, as that seemed far too risky. The only other option was to use Kate's card instead of her own. The security cameras at the cash machine might give her presence away, which was a worry, but she could disguise herself to avoid a definite identification. She would need to pinch a coat or something from the cloakroom on the way out, not just to hide under but also to conceal the bucket of cash. And the biggest worry was that she didn't know Kate's PIN code, so she might, in the end, fail to get the money that she needed despite running the risk of discovery. It was a long shot.

The PIN code would be a problem, but first things first. The immediate priority was to leave the opera house, before she was discovered. Zoe scuttled through the still-empty reception areas, down to the foyer, and into the cloakroom to

the side. High in the corner of the room, she saw a small screen showing a crackly black-and-white image of the door that she had just come through. On the screen, the door was still swinging shut behind her, as it was in real life, but of herself she could see no sign. Of course! She remembered now. She no longer had a reflection. The mirror could no longer tell her either lies or uncomfortable truths. And perhaps the security camera was just a sort of digital mirror. Zoe's image no longer existed.

Or did it? Was this security camera really live? Maybe she was just standing in the wrong place to be picked up in the image? But there wasn't time to experiment. For now, Zoe thought it safest to rely on a physical means of disguising her image, rather than hoping that her unfortunate vampire state would make her invisible on camera.

She selected the most voluminous garment she could see on the racks of deserted outerwear: a big, black cloak, clearly hired from a costume shop as part of one of the ornate historical outfits that many of the audience had been wearing when they evacuated the building without time to reclaim their coats. Throwing it round her shoulders, concealing the bucket from view, she ran to the door, checked that the police weren't looking in her direction, then scuttled off back down the Rue Favart.

It took a good half hour of exploring before she saw a cash machine. Before approaching it, she pulled the top of the cloak over her head, to mask her face and hair. Nervously, she took out Kate's bank card, and fiddled with it, wondering what Kate would have used as her password. She wouldn't have used the code that the bank had sent her, Zoe reckoned, but would have changed it to something more memorable. Her birthday, maybe? Zoe inserted the card, then tapped in the

code accordingly. Rejected. She'd have to try again.

If not her birthday, then what? Her phone number? Possibly, but Zoe couldn't remember Kate's phone number — remembering phone numbers was a skill for which she saw no need, being used to smartphones that let you find people by name instead. Her phone password code? No, that was six digits long, not four, and Zoe didn't know what it was, anyway. Time was ticking, and there could be only one, or at most two, further attempts at using the card before the machine would assume that she was a fraudster or thief and therefore swallow the card for security reasons. Zoe tried to remember all the situations in which she had seen Kate enter a number code.

And then she got it. A few months ago, on a visit to the gym, Zoe had finished her workout and realised that she had forgotten to bring her shampoo with her; Kate (puffing away on the cross-country skiing machine) had gasped out the code to her gym locker, so that Zoe could use her shampoo instead. What was that code? Ah, yes. She remembered. At least, she hoped she remembered...

Hesitantly, Zoe tapped in the digits, and her stomach flipped over with relief when the bank accepted them. Now to withdraw the cash. Kate's bank seemed to have a higher daily withdrawal limit than Zoe's, offering a number of options going up to €500. After a brief moment in which Kate promised herself that she would pay back the money to Kate's estate, Zoe chose the full five hundred. But the bank declined to pay it out. What did the message say? They didn't teach you that sort of French in GCSE classes. Insufficient funds? Zoe wasn't surprised. Kate had always been a bit strapped for cash.

Still peeking through the folds of the cloak shrouding her from view, Zoe tried again, scared to get it wrong in case the card was retained. How much money might Kate have had in

her account? Never mind that — what was the minimum amount that Zoe needed? €100 would allow her to pay Raymond, but leave her with only a small handful of loose change, so that wasn't feasible as she would surely need money again, just to get by. Ideally, she would like to keep her own €100, but “borrow” money from others to cover the detective's fee. So, the ideal amount to take from Kate's account would be... €200. Don't be greedy, she told herself. €200 is enough. And she pressed the on-screen button accordingly.

The ATM whirred, and spat out the bank card, so Kate retrieved it and waited for the cash to be dispensed. She'd done it. Now to get back to Raymond's, to hand it over.

Eventually, Zoe found her way back to the right part of town, the bucket weighing ever heavier with each wrong turn or misremembered junction. Paris at night was a bit scary, once you were off the tourist track. She breathed a sigh of relief when she recognised the Place Boieldieu, now empty of police and with no sign of the suspicious car or of the earlier fracas. She turned into the Rue Javart, found the right building, and rang the bell for Raymond.

He appeared, eventually. “What time of night do you call this?”

Zoe snapped at him wearily. “I wasn't sure if you'd be here, or if you'd have gone home. Do you want the money, or don't you?”

“Come on up, then,” he said, and they climbed the stairs to the first-floor of the building, going into the office where they had spoken earlier.

Zoe took off the cloak, and sat down on the uncomfortable-looking grey sofa. “I've got what you asked for,” she said. “It's all here. At least, I hope it is. I did count it.

If it's wrong, then it'll be in your favour, as I think it's a few Euros over the three thousand." She pushed the bucket across the floor to him, with her foot, then slumped backwards in an exhausted heap. "I hope that'll make up for the loose coinage."

Raymond's lip twisted in displeasure. Zoe could tell that he wasn't happy. He'd been woken up in the middle of the night, then paid with a bucketful of pennies that looked as though she had raided the piggy banks of all children not just in the 2nd Arrondissement, but in the neighbouring 1st, 3rd, 9th and 10th as well. "There are plenty of notes at the bottom," she added. "It's not all coins."

Raymond examined the bucket, and pointed at its side. "What's this about?"

"What do you mean?"

"This. The label. It says 'please give generously to support our establishment of overseas blood transfusion services', or words to that effect."

"Does it really?" Zoe sat up. "That's quite funny, in the circumstances. Is it OK to pay you like this? It's the best I could come up with, and I promise you that the full fee is there, in that bucket. You can count it if you don't believe me."

"I suppose it'll do," Raymond grunted. "But I'm not too happy."

"That makes two of us, Raymond. Just find me a vampire!"

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 looser 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 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 driver's 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 led 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 way 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 PATTED 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

Simon Horn

CRAIG EVANS NEEDED A drink.

Kate had been dead, no question, but where was Zoe?

The police had been so helpful, so reassuring for the distressed foreigner. “Pardon, monsieur. We do not know, monsieur. We were told she was dead, monsieur. There must have been some mistake. No, we do not know where she is. Perhaps her hotel, monsieur?”

The echo of the inspector washing his hands of the affair had trailed Craig out into the bright sunshine and blaring noise and bustle of Paris traffic.

The hotel had been no help. Apparently no one had informed them that Kate was dead and Zoe was missing. The man at the desk had been sympathetic; he even let him go up to see the room, accompanied by a porter. Kate’s things were still there, but Zoe’s were not. At least that meant Zoe had to be alive, unless someone else had taken her luggage.

He sat in a café around the corner, nursing a whisky. Clearly it was some sort of mistake, but if she wasn’t dead why hadn’t she gone to the police? She had to be all right. What if

she wasn't? What if she was in hospital?

I'm an idiot, Craig thought and he pulled out his phone. Why not just call her. He hadn't called her before because she was... dead. But there was no ring and he immediately got the "leave a voicemail" message. He did, but wasn't confident that she would get it.

Then he dialled Jane at work.

"Jane Peterson."

"Jane, it's Craig. Jane, Zoe isn't dead."

"Thank God! But what.."

"She's not dead, but she's missing. I can't find her. No one knows where she is."

"But Craig, what happened?"

"I don't know... but her friend Kate *is* dead, throat cut or something. Found in an alley."

"Was Zoe there when it happened?"

Craig sighed. "I don't know Jane. I don't know anything, and the police are no help and Zoe's luggage is missing from her hotel."

"You don't think that Zoe had anything to do..." Jane hesitated.

"I can't believe that," Craig snapped, "they were best friends. But what the hell do I do? She might be injured, lying in a hospital somewhere. How do I find someone in a city of two million people?"

"What about getting help? If the police won't do anything, what about hiring someone?"

"What, a private investigator?"

Craig thought for a moment. "Maybe that's an idea," he said. "I'll try that, Jane. I'll let you know tomorrow what happens."

His next problem was finding a private investigator, in a

city of two million. It would have to be one who spoke English, since Craig didn't think his French was up to explaining that he had thought his sister was dead but that she hadn't been in the morgue when he arrived and the police didn't know what had happened and she had disappeared from her hotel.

I'm going round in circles, he thought.

The barman directed him to a "cybercafé", almost next door and, after some difficulty and with a bit of help from the attendant, found himself looking at the *Pages jaune francaises*, at a list of "Detective prive". ("Private detective" had just brought up pages of every else private, but not detectives.)

He went through the list; it was discouraging. They were either hole-in-the-wall individuals you wouldn't trust to find your pet cat or high-flying corporate agencies! Surely an agency would speak English, though none of them seemed to mention it. Then, on the last page, he found something: "Louis Raymond, Détective privé/Private Detective, Investigations, 10, rue Favart, 75001 Paris".

Perhaps. He took out his mobile and dialed the number (the back of his mind thinking, God knows how much this is all costing). There was no answer. "Nous ne pouvons pas répondre actuellement. S'il vous plaît, laissez un message et un numéro de téléphone. We are not able to answer your call at present. Please leave a message and phone number where you can be reached."

Craig left a message without giving any details and then decided not to wait. It was already the middle of the afternoon, and it looked as if rain might be coming. Leaving the cybercafé he hailed a taxi.

Rue Favart was a strange mixture. In the 2nd arrondissement,

only a 15-minute walk from the Louvre, it was a street where thriving cafés stood close to dingy-looking auction houses and osteopaths' offices. Opposite Place Boieldieu, in front of the majestic Opera Comique building, stood number 10, in a relatively prosperous-looking apartment block. Typically Parisian, its four main stories were topped by the usual garret. The next building along was definitely even more prosperous and one story taller. It housed a restaurant that looked as if it had been welcoming operagoers at least since the Opera Comique was rebuilt at the end of the 19th century.

Craig was reassured. When the taxi had turned down rue Favart, the shabby buildings on either side had called up pictures of dismal PI offices in Hollywood films, but when the driver pulled up, saying “Numero 10, monsieur”, the magnificent bulk of the opera house and the clean stone of the apartment building banished his visions.

As Craig reached the door, a tall, athletic-looking man was approaching from the other direction. While Craig looked at the nameplates by the door, the other man had pulled out a key.

“Est-que je peut vous aider, monsieur?”

“I’m sorry,” Craig answered. “Do you speak English?”

“But of course,” the stranger replied, with no accent whatsoever. “I’m from Vancouver.”

“I’m, I’m looking for Monsieur Raymond.”

“Well then you have found him. How may I help you?”, Raymond said.

But before Craig could respond, Raymond continued, “But let us not discuss on the doorstep. Come up to my offices.”

Inside, the building was not as impressive as it had seemed from the street. As they climbed — “I’m on the fourth floor. Sorry.” — each floor seemed a little less affluent and a little

dirtier. While Raymond seemed to bound up the stairs, Craig had some difficulty keeping up, though the detective occasionally looked back and slowed down.

Raymond's offices were indeed on the fourth floor, and at the back. Raymond went down a narrow hallway and unlocked the door. Craig's face fell as they entered a small space that held no more than a desk and single chair and a tall filing cabinet.

"My... receptionist is away." Raymond remarked, apparently noticing Craig's expression. He unlocked a second door at the back. "Come through, Mr..."

"Evans," said Craig.

Raymond looked back sharply. "Excuse me, what did you say?"

"Evans. My name is Craig Evans. I left you a message but you were out, so I decided to come straight round."

For a moment Raymond seemed nonplussed, but then he said, "Yes, I had things to attend to, and, as I said, my receptionist is away. Please, come into my office."

Raymond's inner office was not much more prepossessing than the outer one, but it was at least fairly big. A large desk at the back held a ancient-looking computer, a phone and a couple of piles of paperwork. A comfortable desk chair sat behind it and two others, less comfortable looking, faced it. A small grey couch sat against the wall to the right of the door. It did not look very inviting.

"Please, sit down," Raymond said, "and let's have some light." He went round behind the desk and opened a blind that was hiding the single window. It seemed to face out on to a narrow courtyard.

Raymond sat down, and then said, "May I ask how you found me, Mr Evans. Did someone refer you to me?"

“Look,” Craig answered, “I’m in trouble... or my sister is. You were the first investigator I could find that appeared to speak English.”

“I see. Perhaps you should explain your problem.”

Craig told the story. He had never consulted a private detective before, but it seemed to him that Raymond was uncomfortable.

“So,” Craig continued, “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what has happened to Zoe. Why did they think she was dead? Was she at the morgue? Did she just walk out? Is she injured somewhere? You have to help me. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Have you checked the hospitals?” Raymond asked. “That is probably the first thing to do. And I agree with you that the police seem to have behaved unconscionably. You should probably go back and demand that they do something.” He paused. “Beyond that, I don’t know what I can do for you.”

“But... I don’t know how to deal with the Paris police. I thought about talking to the people at the morgue again, but there’s no point in seeing the same officials. They’d just deny everything again. Can’t you find someone who might know what happened, where she went... whether she is dead or alive. I can pay, whatever you ask.”

“There is nothing I can do. Mr Evans. If the police deny that your sister was ever there...”

“The why did I get the phone call from the morgue? Who called me?”

“Perhaps the other woman was carrying something with your sister’s name and address on it. Perhaps it was simply a mistake, and now the authorities won’t admit it. It would not be the first time.”

“I just don’t understand why you won’t help me.”

They argued back and forth for a while, but Raymond was unmoving: “I cannot help you.”

Finally Craig got to his feet. He seemed in a daze, repeating “I don’t know what to do.” under his breath.

“I am very sorry, Mr Evans.”

Raymond heard the outside door bang as Craig left.

At the other end of the line the phone rang. Once, twice, three times... Finally Raymond heard a click and a distant voice: “Yes. Who is it?”

“Zoe? Is that you?”

“What? Raymond? I was asleep. What do you want. Have you found them.”

“No. not yet, “ Raymond answered. “I was out earlier looking, but that doesn’t matter now. Your brother was here.”

“What?” Zoe cried. “How?”

“Just bad luck as far as I can see,” he answered. “He simply looked for an English-speaking detective and found me. He wanted me to find you, but I put him off. I said I couldn’t do anything, that he should go back to the police. He is afraid you are lying in some hospital... if you are not dead somewhere.”

“Raymond, he mustn’t find me!”

chapter twelve

Claire Woodier

“YOU HAVE?” RAYMOND CLUMSILY blew smoke into his own eyes as he rushed to stub out his cigarette. “Where?” He stood up, put the receiver on his shoulder and searched for a pen. “Really?” He gave up on the pen and looked up at the ceiling to help himself retain the information. “Okay.” He hung up and immediately dialled again. “Zoe?” He took out another cigarette and lit it.. “Got one.” He patted his pockets for his car keys. “Yep, yes... A young woman.” He fished out the keys and replaced them with the Marlboros. “Yes. She works in the Pharmacie Internationale.”

Zoe and Raymond walked up the street together. They hadn’t spoken for a good few minutes as they both individually processed what they thought was about to happen.

“I can’t believe she works in the Pharmacy.” Muttered Zoe. “Just like that.” She chewed her bottom lip, nervous. “Ooch!” She sucked in her breath.. “Owww.” She whined and felt her face. She kept forgetting about those ridiculous incisors. She was going to have to stop that nervous habit of hers, she had

drawn blood, and now she was going to interrogate a Vampire. Yep. ‘Great fucking going Zoe’ she thought.

They were at the entrance of the store. “Jesus!” Said Raymond as he did a double-take at Zoe’s face, which was now dripping with blood. Zoe was compressing it with her sleeve. He patted his pockets again for the ridiculous prospect of a handkerchief. At least they had a viable excuse to be there.. even if Zoe was now essentially human bait for a bloodthirsty fiend.

“Can I help you?” Interrupted the young woman, suddenly right before them from nowhere.

“Erm.” Gulpd Raymond open-mouthed. Zoe swallowed some of her own blood. They stood there, paused, waiting for.. something. The woman’s pale wide eyes scanned over Zoe’s mouth and sleeve, tracing the evidence of her blood.

“You seem to be having some.. difficulty.”

“Oh, no, no no. I’m SO fine.” Blustered Zoe, inexplicably brushing herself off. “I just need something to stop the er, bleeding.” Raymond smiled awkwardly amongst the stupidity of it all. “I um, accidentally stabbed myself.” The woman’s eyes widened slightly in concern. “With um, a cocktail umbrella.” Zoe winced. At the utter crap that was coming out of her mouth, and at the pain of her recent tooth stabbing.

“Could you point us in the direction of some dressings? Maybe a first aid kit?” Blinkd Raymond.

“I, I just need a plaster that’s all. Ha ha he’s SO over-protective.” Zoe rolled her eyes at the woman in front of them, who was still staring at Zoe’s wound. She slowly blinked, pulling her gaze away from Zoe’s blood to each of their eyes in turn in a silent gesture that said ‘Follow me’.

Raymond snarled at Zoe as they walked behind the woman. She was slender, drawn even; tall, incredibly beautiful

and oh-so-very pale. Zoe questioned him back with her eyes. 'Is that her?' Raymond confirmed it with a widening of his. They both blew out big breaths.

Raymond had briefed Zoe in the car. She had been identified as fitting the profile: appearance, demeanour etc etc. His source was pretty certain this young female was, in fact, a Vampire. Their job was to apprehend her and get the information they needed.

"Hold it!" cried Zoe in the car. "How in hell do you suggest we apprehend her? Aren't all Vampires like seriously handy? We'll never be able to hold her down."

"Oh, well. WE won't be doing anything." Said Raymond, raising his eyebrows. Zoe frowned.

"Oh no. ME? What do you even mean? ME?"

Raymond looked at her. "Have you even tried anything out? We're off to find out some stuff, but you DO KNOW that you ARE a Vampire right?" Zoe, looked at him, then looked down at her hands, as if the look of them would give her an answer.

"I hadn't thought about it." She said, and looked out of the window to think about how she could test it.

They were following the 'woman' towards the back of the store, and both had Adrenalin tearing through their bodies. Zoe was convinced she would be able to hear their blood pulsing harder through their veins. It was deafening her, and the build-up was making her panic. They needed to move, capture her. How would she do it? She looked slighter than Zoe, but did that matter when your strength comes from a being a Vampire, not from your own physiology? "You can totally take her." Raymond had said, unconvincingly. But how?

She needed to be interrogated. Maybe I could make friends with her Zoe thought.

“Let me take a look at your wound.” Said the woman spinning toward her suddenly. Her hand was at Zoe’s lip, and her mouth was inappropriately WAY too close. Zoe clenched everything and looked over at Raymond. The Vampire’s mouth was open, like she was moving in for a kiss. ‘This doesn’t feel very professional’ thought Zoe, and moved back.

“I wanted to ask you a couple of things.” Zoe laughed nervously, watching Raymond out of the corner of her eye as he moved slowly towards the woman, a gesture that indicated they needed to make their move. Zoe flicked her look back at the female and noticed the white tips of a couple of fangs. She panicked and grabbed a packet of pocket-sized tissues shoving them in the Vampires mouth, corking those incisors, and pushed her down onto a waiting chair.

“Grab her!” Shouted Raymond as he furiously looked for something to help restrain her. “Hold her on that chair!”

Zoe impulsively wrapped her arms around the confused woman, holding her tight.

“Don’t CUDDLE her! Keep her there!” Shouted Raymond.

Zoe didn’t know what else to do. She ‘cuddled’ her tighter.

“Oh for goodness sake.” said the Vampire, who had somehow managed to spit out the tissues. “Put me down.” Inexplicably, Zoe did as she was told. Raymond was still ferreting around the store looking for makeshift restraints. Zoe cleared her throat to alert him. He paused, holding his breath.

“Lock ze front door.” She said calmly. “You have questions no?” And proceeded to put the kettle on. “We need tea je pense.”

Zoe blew the hot tea and wondered how she was going to drink it without it bloody hurting. “So are ANY of them true?” She asked, giving up on the tea.

“Ow should I know?” Said the Vampire, smoothing her perfect shiny hair. “You ‘ear about all of zeez myths, but I’m not about to TRY zem. What if one of them works? For all eternity you’ll be zat complete idiot that went out in ze sunlight for a short stroll and reduced zemselves to a pile of burnt rubble and ash because you thought you might just ‘try it and see’? Pffuh!” She scoffed. Zoe and Raymond both acknowledged her point with raised eyebrows. “And what was ze point of approaching me with violence?” She said. “You could’ve just asked me nicely.”

“I thought you might go at me.” Said Zoe woefully.

“Normally I would’ve done.” Snapped the Vampire. “But that ridiculous hugging. I felt like I should take pity on you. You must be new at zis no?”

“Yep.” Said Zoe sadly. “I just wanted to know more, what is and isn’t real.”

“Speak to George.” She said, applying some lip balm.”George Gordon. He’s been around for far longer than me. Centuries more. He’ll ‘ave more to tell you.” She pressed her lips together. “Although quite why you feel the need to have a categorical affirmation is beyond me. Its not that much to ask. Just avoid it all! What would you miss about holy water? Or fire? The only thing I miss is my own reflection.” She sighed, delicately cupping her cheek with the palm of her hand. “Or maybe the odd piece of silver jewellery..”

“Silver!” Exclaimed Zoe, and grabbed a set of nearby earrings by the cardboard from a carousel.

“Yes. I often feel like trying them on, but I daren’t risk it.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Zoe said, waving them as she

pondered the idea.

The pharmacy went quiet except for the buzzing of the neon sign in the door and the thwacking of the cardboard against Zoe's chair.

"I know-" said Zoe, gesturing with the earrings, causing them to fly out of her hand.. flying in apparent slow motion across the room towards the Vampire. Raymond began to stand and Zoe began to wince as she watched the silver earrings hit the Vampire's perfect porcelain cheekbone, sizzling into her flesh and causing the woman to scream diabolically.

The Vampire's eyes bulged with purple fury as she brushed the silver weapon away with her hand, leaving a permanent taint on her alabaster skin. "MY FACE!" she bellowed, suddenly no longer high-pitched and in pain, but FURIOUSLY bass-low from the depths of hell. "I will END YOU!"

She flew across to grab Zoe with both hands but was stopped in her tracks. She stood there. Zoe blinked, looking, not knowing what had happened. The vampire looked down. Sticking out of her chest was a biro. Right through the heart. She fell to the floor in a beautiful heap.

"Found my pen." Said Raymond, as he took Zoe by the hand to get out of there.

chapter thirteen

Sue Cowling

RAYMOND WANTED TO KICK something hard, any thing would do, it was so dam frustrating. He looked at the clock again, mid afternoon and still he had not heard anything from the contacts he had been using to get information on George Gordon. He really had expected at least one of them to come back with something useful by now. When he had spoke to them both earlier this morning they had promised an update by lunchtime. My god just thinking about lunch made him realise how hungry he was, he had not had anything to eat since a very early breakfast, and in response his stomach grumbled loudly.

He walked across to the sofa, ready to give up and take a nap, but one look and he changed his mind, too many unsavoury looking stains on it was enough to put him off, and it was never the most comfortable sofa, in fact it was dam uncomfortable to even sit on if he was honest, yet another job to add to his list of to do's, get a new sofa. He went back to his desk and stared at his screen, this George Gordon was one hell of a difficult person to find, he was totally off grid as far

as he could see. He had tried to find out information himself but there was zilch about him, no social security, health or tax information. There was not even a hint of social media information, there was nothing online that he was able to find, and obviously it appeared there was nothing his contacts could find either, otherwise he would surely have heard from them by now.

He just could not understand it, these contacts were reliable, he had used them since moving to Paris three years ago. They both had different skills and he had expected that at least the hacker would find something in that deep dark web he somehow managed to get into. Although he personally did not want to know the ins and out of how he found all this information, the results he came up with were usually brilliant, and that was all he needed.

“Bloody Hell” he shouted, glad there was no receptionist to hear him, he kicked the desk, and the old computer screen vibrated, then went dark. “Shit, thats all I need, a damaged computer”. He rushed round the back of the desk, relieved to see just a loose connector was the problem, slotting it back in , he gave a sigh of relief as the screen lit up.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, it was times like this that he wished he was back in Canada. Just thinking about the place made him want to be in Vancouver, his city of lakes and mountains. He could see himself taking the cable car up to the top of Grouse Mountain, no grouse grind for him, bit too energetic, but still a stroll around the top, take in the views and breathe in that crisp fresh air of the mountain top. He closed his eyes imagining the wind on his face, the view over the city, and of course the smell of the warm cinnamon buns and coffee at the cafe, before taking another cable car back down. Jeez he could see that bun now the doughy warmth

making the buttercream icing on top melt down the sides, and the gooey stickiness, he almost sucked his fingers before realising he was still in Paris and Vancouver was just a dream.

He gave himself a mental shake, he needed to stop daydreaming and get something positive today. Zoe would be expecting good information, after all she was paying him enough, she was one desperate client, imagine being in her position, a vampire and not knowing if going out in the sun would fry you to a crisp, or if holy water would dissolve you,. Mind you the idea of other vampires out there feeling hungry was not exactly a welcoming thought either. He needed to help her, and stay on the right side of the Vampire community, if there was one, after all it could be a lucrative business opportunity too. Also any information on how to protect yourself against a vampire could be useful if this was going to become the norm.

His phone buzzed and he leapt on it, a voicemail from the hacker, his most experienced contact, finally good news he hoped. He listened, then replayed it, feeling slightly sick, all thoughts of food gone.

“Raymond found your guy, sending contact details and image, going off grid, no offence mate but this is my last job need to protect my family, all the best just be careful, no amount of money is any good if you're dead or even undead, get the drift. Hacker.”

Raymond thought back to the last vampire they found, and what happened to him. This was not what he wanted to hear, if his contact was going off grid it was seriously bad news. Still he had this job and he needed to get on with it. First he looked at the image he had been sent ,and was not surprised to find out it was a person that he did not recognise from the public, he had never seen this person before, he had been expecting that, after all he probably wanted to keep himself private

hiding such a big secret. Still he still needed to try and get an appointment to see this guy.

He dialled the number that was on the message and waited, it rung for some time and then just as Raymond was about to give up it clicked, and clicked again as if going through a number of connections. He was feeling decidedly spooked now, when a voice spoke to him.

“Yes, how can I help you?”

Raymond cleared his throat before answering, “Is that George Gordon?” It was tricky to decide if the voice was male or female from the low flat tone. There was a long silence, “Hello?” He asked again.

“Yes, I heard you,” the voice said, “and no I am not George Gordon, he is a very busy man, and not available to talk to”.

By now for Raymond it had been a long unproductive day and this was his one possible lead, and likely to be the only one. He had to see this guy, talk to him and get some answers for Zoe.

“Please, I really need to speak to him, it's a matter of life or death,” he smiled to himself at that terminology, but he was desperate.

“Could I perhaps make an appointment to come to his office?”

“No, he has no appointments free for the next month, and we are not taking any appointments for the summer either, as he may be planning an extended trip”.

Raymond realised he was loosing any ground he might have had.

“Let me leave you my contact details, he can get back to me day or night, maybe tell him it refers to a kindred spirit, someone he can identify with”. With that he quickly rambled

off his phone and email details before the person on the other end had a chance to put the phone down. "Please make George understand how important this is, he could be saving someone".

The phone clicked and Raymond realised he had been cut off, but he was hopeful this guy would get back to him, especially once he put together the idea it was another vampire needing his help, surely he would help one of his own?

He thought back to the other contact no word from him at all, it seemed a bit strange, but he could still phone or email him later if he has any news. He would make a quick call to Zoe on the way back home and update her, maybe set a meeting up for the next day, then get something to eat. It had been a long day, he picked up his jacket and closed the door to his office, locking it carefully, then he turned on the security cameras and locked the reception room, he needed to think about maybe getting a receptionist, to take over some of the paperwork he had trouble getting round to. Lastly he locked the Hallway door and made his way down the stairs and out into the Rue Favart. He could smell all types of delicious food aromas coming from the restaurants nearby, too many choices he thought, smiling to himself. All thoughts of work forgotten in the need to eat something.

Raymond stopped at the food stand and got himself a black coffee and a couple of croissants, he was feeling hungry and after yesterday he thought it best to fuel up while he could. He entered the building and walked slowly upstairs thinking about his current case. Zoe had seemed quite excited by his news and hopeful of some answers that would allow her to start living her life gain, well her undead life, which when he thought about it could be extremely long. It gave him pause

for thought, maybe a vampire life would not be so bad, plenty of time to do all the things you wanted to do, as many times as it took to get it right too. He was smiling as he reached the hallway door, but when he saw the mess of it that quickly disappeared, replaced by a look of trepidation. He dropped his coffee and croissants and slowly opened the door, moving into the small hallway. The door to the reception area was missing, he found it as he walked forward, it was laying smashed on the ground along with a desk that was sitting at an odd angle. As he looked up he could see his office was not so disturbed, the desk appeared intact and the computer was in one piece, just.

“Bloody Hell, what a mess”. He turned on the computer it was blank, a quick look discovered the connector was out again, and once he had plugged it in it lit up. He pulled up the security footage from the night before and scanned through, until he came to the part he was looking for, he wanted to find the bastards that did this before he called the Prefecture of Police, then he saw what had happened and his mouth fell open. He collapsed into his office chair and just stared at the screen. He could see the events unfolding from last night, watched as doors and chairs were literally thrown through the air, smashing down to the floor, but no matter how many times he watched it, there was no person on any of the digital footage, he could come to only one conclusion, and that was that the intruder was a vampire, and the only vampire he knew was George Gordon, apart from his client Zoe.

He needed to contact Zoe and let her know what had happened, and the other contact, maybe he had not got back to Raymond because he could not. Maybe something bad had happened to him too, he would never know probably.

That was very bad news, very bad indeed, and made the whole idea of going off grid, or flying back to Vancouver all

the more inviting, because he suddenly realised that he Raymond was now a target for this George Gordon.

chapter fourteen

CD Johnson

LOUIS LIES ON HIS couch, staring up at the ceiling. Noticing cracks he hadn't noticed before. Had they always been there? Just out of sight, in some corner of the eye where nonubiquitous, uncommon things go unseen. Right there in the peripheral, but unmanaged by the conscious mind. Like many things, it would seem to him, in hindsight.

There is the sound of metal clicking together coming from outside the door. It bothers him a bit.

Louis searches through his memories for other instances in which things were hiding right out of view. But try as he might, he can't seem to find them. Not obvious things, anyway. Just how many times in his lifetime had he missed the existence of vampires? How many times had he crossed their paths, entirely unrecognizable as a terrific event? Now that he knows what he knows, will he ever be that innocent again? He'll look back at those days in which vampires were just fictional characters in cheesy gothic novels, and smirk to himself. "What a clueless moron, I was", he'll think. Or even whisper it under breath. Just to indicate to himself just how

real it all is now.

Louis needs instruction. He turns his head to look around the office. He's been busy that morning. A large full length mirror on a stand now stood in the middle of the side of the room, angled just right so that if he was sitting at his desk he could see the reflection of any person coming through the door in it. On his desk, a large container of water. It took a while for the quiet church to empty itself of its old lady patrons before he could make off with the contents of the bénitier. About a half gallon of holy water. What would the priest think of that (?), he thinks to himself. Or maybe the priest would know exactly why the water was missing. If any body should, wouldn't a priest?

He collected some other items as well: Crucifies - the extra large and ominous kind. Whole garlic cloves from the corner market. Silver chains and charms that he picked up at a nearby novelty store. Not even sure if they are real silver. He's out of his depth, but trying. Gotta do something, right? Be proactive, get behind this situation and push. Louis just wished he knew a lot more than he did. How many cracks in the ceiling are just going to sneak up on him in the coming days?

He hears voices outside joining the clicking of metal parts as people walk up to the door. They ask if Mr. Raymond is in. Another voice says, "Je verrai s'il est occupé."

A woman with a reversed ball cap and jean jacket opens the door and looks in, finding Louis still lying on the couch. "There are people here asking for you, Monsieur Raymond. Should I tell them to come back later?", she inquires. "No, it's okay...", he says. "Let them in."

Louis gets up and moves over to the desk rather quickly. Just in time to catch two women entering the office in the mirror. A tall, skinny redhead and a shorter, stockier brunette

with glasses. There isn't anything particularly unusual about them at first, but then Louis notices the bags they are carrying. Larger than normal purses, intricately embroidered, and looking very elegant and expensive. Not the kind of accessories you'd expect women like these to be carrying around.

"I'm done fixing the lock, Monsieur Raymond. Do you want me to close the door?", the locksmith asks. "No, thank you, you can leave it open, Estelle. Merci pour votre bon travail. un chèque est à la réception. Je vais avoir quelques travaux de menuiserie pour vous dans quelques jours."

As Estelle nods and leaves, the two women walked up to Louis' desk and he sits down. He then notices movement out in the hall. Two others look in. Two men. A rather ragged looking, thin, unshaved man in baggy trousers and a t-shirt; and a more hipster type fellow with short hair in a beige sweater. It was then that Louis also noticed a third pair of eyes looking in. A rather large dog was with them, his head easily as high as the ragged man's navel. But friendly looking. Still, Louis began to get a bad feeling about this.

"Don't worry about them," the brunette said. "They are just tagging along while we do errands."

"Errands, you say", replied Louis. "So what errand can I help you ladies with? ...Americans, right?"

"Nope, where French", the redhead says. "Lived here all our lives." - Her voice was curt and had a ring of sass and sarcasm to it. Louis thought to himself, "definitely American". But why were they lying about it? The brunette started in again.

"So, Mr. Raymond... What can you tell us about the occult?"

"Occult? I wouldn't know much about that, Miss...?"

“We can leave names out of it for now.”

“Oh? Not a very friendly conversation this is going to be, then?”

“We’re friendly,” the redhead interjected sharply. “Just pressed for time. And pleasantries take up time. You know?”

“Yeah. I’ve always thought the same thing... So, the occult, huh? May I ask why you are so interested in that topic? And what made you think it was one I was well-versed enough in to inform you on?”

“Well, we just kind of heard that this is maybe something you’ve had a little experience with recently. That’s all”, the brunette offered.

“Really? And who was it that told you that? A birdy? ...A little BAT, maybe?”

The two women stood there silent. Just looking Louis over. The three from outside the door were exchanging glances and grins. Louis noticed the ragged man introducing small treats to the dog’s mouth. The dog ate the treats, but never once took his eyes off of Louis. It was weird in a overly cute sort of way.

“Look, kids...” Louis said. “Unless you want to ask me specific questions, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I’ve got a pretty long to do list to get through today. So if you don’t mind...”

“Oh, but we do mind”, the redhead said in a more aggressive tone. “We’re busy too, you know? We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t important.”

Just then, the dog stepped into the office and headed over to where the mirror was at the right side of the room from Louis’ perspective, right in front of the windows. He sniffed around the base of the full body mirror, and then sat down in front of it, once again staring at Louis. The two men in the hall didn’t move.

“Okaayyy.... You guys are starting to creep me out a bit. That dog is weird. And je suis très sûr que tu n'es pas français.”

“What?”, the redhead asked.

“Exactly, Red!”

The two women exchange glances of annoyance. The brunette moves closer to Louis’ desk, examining the objects he had placed there that morning. She reaches down and runs her finger along the length of a crucifix. Louis is somewhat relieved she did that. She looks up at Louis and asks:

“Do you know what fear is, Mr. Raymond?”

“Sure. I know what fear is.”

“What is it?”

“It’s way for your mind to tell you that something isn’t quite right. That you need to be alert. Ready to react because something bad may be about to happen. It’s a cue for fight or flight.”

“No, Mr. Raymond. That is not what fear is.”

“No?”

“No... Fear is the primary motivator of human will. However, that is not to say it is a beneficial motivator. As neuroscience has demonstrated, a production of fear in the amygdala and limbic system produces a corresponding effect of lessened activity in the frontal lobe, the seat of our reason and intelligence. So fear makes us stupid, Mr. Raymond. Fear is a weakness we must overcome. Only then, is fight or flight possible.”

She continued, “Some new evolutionary theories also suggest that because fear has a detrimental and not positive effect on our cognitive reactions and flight or fight response — you see, fear produces panic which causes us to slow down rather than speed up in reaction time and commit more errors

in our actions — fear may have in fact been an evolutionary means by which a species could be rid of its weaker members. Stronger members who could overcome the fear response would run and fight and live. Weaker members who could not because of their overwhelming panic would be eaten by predators.”

The brunette moved away from the desk. “And while humans no longer fear outside predators other than parasites and viruses, you can still see how this dynamic plays out in our cultures as weaker, more fearful members of humanity fall prey to human predators, their violence and their manipulations, rather easily.”

“Okay...”, Raymond interrupts. “What does all of this have to do with the occult, though?”

“What I am saying, Mr. Raymond, is that for any person faced with that which is unknown and threatening, fear is not a good companion. That includes when it comes to matters that are otherwise hidden just out of view from our expectations about what the world is really like. The things we don’t notice. Like cracks in the ceiling. Do you know what I mean, Mr. Raymond?”

Louis is taken seriously aback by the question. What exactly was going on here? What was he not seeing about this situation? Because there is no way that “cracks in the ceiling” were random words coming out of this woman’s mouth.

The redhead moved over to the desk, and Louis in his surprise at the brunette’s words had failed to notice that she had taken something out of the expensive looking bag that she was carrying. For a second he was panicked, because he imagined it could be a weapon. Then in the next second, he remembered what the brunette had just said about panic.

And in the span of those two seconds, the redhead had

hastily placed an old book on Louis' desk. Louis realized he was gripping the arms of his chair rather tightly. So he relaxed a bit, and stared over at the book. The dog was also in his line of sight and still looking at him sort of intently. Then the dog stood on all fours, turned, and left the office.

The two men who had continued to wait outside followed the dog towards the reception area, out of Raymond's view. Then the two women turn and left as well, not bothering to even look back.

"What the holy f*ck!", Louis said, kind of wishing he had not said that aloud. They were still in earshot. Louis picked up the book from the desk. It was a plain old worn brown cover with no title or text on the spine. He walked over to the window to see if the five "strangers" — who lived up to that label rather absurdly — had left the building. He watched leave out the door and cross the street, eventually turning the corner.

Louis grabs his coat, placing the book in one of its large pockets, and rushes out the door, slamming it behind him. He jogs over the corner that the quintet disappeared around, and peeks around the building to see if they are still in sight. He spots them turning another corner a block away and decides to follow.

Eventually they arrive at a building along the Avenue des Gobelins. "Well, that's appropriate", he mumbles. As the four humans went into the building, Raymond is spotted by the dog who has turned to see him standing about half a block away. The dog turns and stares for a bit, recognizing Louis. Louis thinks to just walk over, but then the ragged man comes and calls the dog in. The dog spins quickly into the open door which closes behind him. Louis walks over to a doorway just out of sight of the building's windows.

The building isn't anything particularly remarkable. It looks like a living residence, though at some point in its past, it may have been a school or some sort, based on the design of its windows. He decides to wait around a bit and see if anyone else comes or goes. After all, these people seem to know about him, but they were themselves a mystery. And Louis was quickly getting tired of these kinds of mysteries. People who in one way or another could pose a serious threat to him, for reasons he could only guess at.

Louis leaned back against the doorway and reach into his pocket, removing the book that the redhead had given him. Given him, or simply left there on the desk? That seemed to Louis to be an important distinction to make.

He opened the book to the very first page, hoping to find a title or label of some sort. There was none. The first page started out as someone's journal entry. Though, not a typical rundown of the events of the day. Just a musing about a particular subject that seemed entirely odd for just a first entry in journal. One book in a series of journals, maybe? - Louis thought. In any case, the book was in French and one word in particular stood out rather clearly: Revenant.

Louis began to read:

«Rosamonde calls them beautiful. All of them. And I admit, that was my first impression of them as well. Everything about them seemed otherworldly and pulchritudinous. But I recall something a Hindu guru once said. About the Beautiful Lie. A lie so intriguingly attractive that even if you know it is a lie, you dare not expose it for fear that it may go away. And the beauty would then be lost.»

«I have imagined an ugly revenant. Vampire. And I did not have to alter any objective characteristics of them in order to

do that. I just had to see past my biases.»

“Emotional attachment is the predicate to bias. To remove your bias, you remove your attachment. What is your attachment made of? That which you favor versus that which you don't.»

«The image of the notion of the beautiful revenant is merely a collection of things which I have had a positive reaction to. My admiration for the unrelentingly strange and esoteric nature of their kind. But I have exchange these positive notions for things which I have a negative reaction to. I think of Wittgenstein and his butterfly. That subjectively beautiful butterfly that one might insist could no more be turned ugly than a feathery blue sky be painted an ungodly puce. “Suppose someone were to say: Imagine this butterfly exactly as it is, but ugly instead of beautiful?!”»

«For me, it was the microscopic picture of butterfly wings. I found them to be horrific. Because I have always been subliminally and legitimately perturbed by scaly things. Scaly bugs in particular. And here was a deceptive butterfly lying about its scaly nature revealed in the lens of a microscope. And I thought about the times in which I touched a butterfly wing and some of their powdery coat got onto my fingers. And I thought about what it was really made of. What it really looked like up close. What I had just gotten on my skin. It was disgusting. Butterflies are disgusting.»

«Subjectively, that butterfly wasn't looking so beautiful anymore. And now I had a basis for viewing the revenant in the negative as well. What were they that we were getting onto our skin?”»

The book contained a number of other entries, but no name seemed to appear on the pages. Louis placed the book back

into his pocket. He looked over at the building. Small droplets of rain seem to hang in the air around him without actually making anything wet. The sun was starting to go down. And Louis thought to himself: “The beautiful lie? Yeah, that sums up my whole life just perfectly. A beautifully flawless ceiling.”

chapter fifteen

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

RAYMOND SHIFTED IN THE uncomfortable seat, struggling to stifle a yawn. He's been sitting here for hours and other than the few humans he followed here, no sign of a vampire. He checked his phone for a second time in ten minutes, rolling his neck around on his shoulders.

I've lost my mind. Sitting here in this bloody car, waiting for a vampire. The fuck is wrong with you?

Eyes alert, Raymond. Last thing you need is to get bitten by one of these blood suckers.

The door to the large house opened and Raymond straightened up in his seat. He brought the large digital camera up, centered his subject into the viewfinder, and took the shot.

Bingo.

He set the camera aside, removed the keys from the ignition, and carefully opened the driver's side door. He kept his eyes on his target, watching him pull the collar to his heavy jacket around his neck before heading east on Avenue des Gobelins. With his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, Raymond followed after him.

He's not much of a vampire expert. Truth be told, he keeps his distance. They stay on their side, he stays on his, everyone's happy. He's read the same books everyone else has. Holy water and crosses should incapacitate a vampire. Stakes in the heart should kill them. They can't walk in sunlight. This he knows is true. Shit didn't start happening until after the sun went down. When lights were turned on in the house. So what role does the humans play? Lure humans here for a vampire feeding frenzy? Do they keep the blood suckers safe while they're sleeping?

Enough. Focus on the task.

Raymond kept his distance. Just like he kept his mind blank. Just in case they do have some head trip ability. The young vampire made his way down the sidewalk, pausing to look behind him. Raymond shifted his gaze away, wondering what the hell he's doing when he caught the two young girls in short skirts strolling by. They're just as interested, flashing smiles, batting their eyes, giggling softly when they sashayed past.

Destination is the La Manufacture Cafe.

The hell is he doing here?

Raymond walked past the front door, stopping in front of the wall of windows. He slid his phone out of his front pocket, pretending to be looking for a landmark, keeping his eyes on the vampire inside.

La Manufacture Cafe on Avenue des Gobelins. Raymond

He shoved his phone back into his front pocket, shifting the weight of the bag on his shoulder, and headed for the entrance. Raymond reached for the handle, it's jerked away from the inside. He lifted his head to find two very dark eyes.

"Pardon." Raymond greeted, stepping aside to let his target past. "Bonsoir."

He didn't respond with words. Just a low guttural noise from deep inside his chest. Pretty sure he meant it as a warning, maybe Raymond wasn't so sneaky after all, but disregarded the thought.

Absolutely no way he knows I'm following him.

Raymond entered the cafe, walked the pathway along the line of windows, ignoring the curious stares from the patrons. The blood sucker kept walking, head down, and only when Raymond stopped because he ran out of space did the vampire turn his head to look right at him. He flashed a smile, fangs and all before disappearing out of sight.

"Shit."

Raymond backtracked towards the exit.

"Puis-je vous aider, monsieur?"

"Non, merci."

He ended his polite let down with a smile, pushing open the door, letting a draft of cold air in. He took several large strides in the same direction the vampire was last seen.

"You're following me."

Raymond stopped in his tracks, spying him leaning against the brick wall between two buildings.

"What makes you say that?"

He pushed himself off. Raymond's hand dropped to the bag, wrapping around the first thing he came across. Holy water.

I hope this shit works.

"Look. I have a friend who just wants to ask you a few questions. That's all."

He cocked his head to the side, eyes looking a little too bright for the dark accommodations.

Raymond waited. Waited for the right time, slowly unscrewing the cap with his middle and forefinger. Jobs like

this doesn't scare him. Getting bit by this asshole does.

The job taught him patience. When the blood sucker lunged at him, Raymond threw the vial of holy water into his face, waiting for the high pitch screams as it ate away his flesh.

It didn't do a fucking thing.

Zoe smiled at the gentleman who held the door to the cafe open. She stepped in, eyes darting around for Raymond. He's not sitting at the bar nor at any of the tables.

"May I help you?"

Zoe's eyes rested on the hostess.

"A friend of mine is here." She took another look around.

"Only I don't see him."

"What does he look like?"

"He's over six foot, short, black hair. Strong."

She nodded her head.

"He was here, but only for a second. He left maybe ten minutes ago."

"Merci."

Zoe spun around on her heels, pulling her jacket tighter around herself. It's cold this time of year, but since the attack, she hasn't been able to get warm. She slid her finger across the screen to unlock her phone.

I'm here. Where are you?

She hit send, bringing her hands up to blow on them.

I'll give him five minutes and then I'm heading back.

A breeze wafted through bringing the smell of garlic. Not the simmering garlic in a sauce smell, but raw garlic that has been crushed. Her head snapped towards the small alley between the two buildings. Another scent hit her senses.

Blood.

And voices.

Zoe took a deep breath, smoothing back strands of hair that stuck to her cheek. She peered into the alley, holding a hand to her nose when the smell of garlic intensified. Raymond is up against the wall, his feet dangling, a man holding him in place with one hand.

“What are you doing?” Zoe called out, wishing now she would have brought something to protect herself.

Would he hurt her? Is there a code of conduct? You can’t hurt your own?

“Let him go.”

He turned his head to flash long white fangs, a growl erupting from him. Hairs on the back of her neck stood straight up. If her heart worked the way it used to, it would be racing right now.

Her foot kicked something across the pavement and she dropped her gaze to see a broken vial, shards of glass glistening from the street lamp.

“Let him go.”

“Get lost.”

Zoe’s close enough to see red specks in the depths of his dark eyes. She struggled not to run, what happened to her and Kate causing her fear to heighten. And he knows it, flashing her another smile.

“Unless, you want to stick around for dessert.”

She closed her eyes, sucking in a sharp breath. Raymond muttered a couple of words, she didn’t catch what he said, and here in a few minutes, it’s not going to matter. The man holding Raymond dropped his head into the nape of his neck. It’s an intimate act, one you see lovers engage in, and usually in dark areas like this.

Raymond threw his head forward. The cracking sound of two foreheads connecting broke the silence. The man

stumbled back, Raymond fell to his knees, gasping for air before throwing himself at him.

There's a blur of bodies trying to get the dominant position. Zoe rushed towards the discarded duffle bag, grabbing the first thing she got her hands on.

"Stop it!" She kicked a foot at them. "You can't hurt him! I need answers."

The man jumped up, Zoe let out a small yelp, stumbling back until she hit the wall.

She held up the large wooden cross.

"Doesn't work." Raymond stated.

"How do you know?" She called out, despite the vampire is still moving towards her.

And he's laughing.

"Because you're holding the damn thing."

Point taken and she dropped it to her feet.

That answers one of the questions I had. Apparently garlic doesn't work either.

The man pressed himself against her, sticking his nose into her hair.

"Ce sera un plaisir de vous dévorer."

"I'm one of you." She managed to get out. "You can't hurt me."

"Oui je peux."

"S'il vous plaît."

He grinned, running his tongue along the bright white fangs, the red in his eyes more prominent. Zoe shook her head when he leaned in.

"S'il vous plaît." She said again, squeezing her eyes shut when she felt the tips of his fangs.

He's pulled off of her, Raymond throwing him to the ground. He straddled him, gripped the wooden cross in both

hands, and with every ounce of strength he has left, drove the stake into his chest.

Zoe gasped, turning her face away. Blood soaked his shirt, his howls turned to screams before fading off.

Raymond pushed himself up onto his feet, wiping his hands on his jeans.

Holy water didn't work.

Neither did garlic.

But a wooden cross driven into his heart works just fine.

chapter sixteen

Ian E Hart

THE TWO GREY-COATED *officiers mortuaires* lifted the stretcher with the vampire's body—the stake tenting the covering sheet like some grotesque erection—and slid it through the rear doors of the grey Citroën van. The fat gendarme slapped the corrugated side panel and the *camion mortuaire* eased its way into the pre-dawn traffic on the *avenue des Gobelins* and disappeared around the corner en route to the mortuary that Zoe was familiar with. She shivered, partly because of shock brought on by the horror of the past half hour—they'd murdered a man, there was no avoiding the fact, even though it was self-defence and the 'man' hadn't strictly been human. "But what's the difference between him and me?" she wondered. She looked up at the other gendarme questioning Raymond: how long until the handcuffs on his belt encircled her wrists? how long until the bullets in his snub, black pistol pierced her chest like the stake they'd driven into the vampire's heart?

The gendarme was asking Raymond brief questions, listening impatiently to his answers and jotting details in his

official notebook. Zoe found herself staring at him, fascinated by the details of his appearance: unlike Raymond, who was tall and athletic, the policeman was thin, with a wrinkled prune-like face, a greasy moustache and an air of great weariness. His clothes didn't seem to fit—his hardware-laden belt pinched the uniform around his waist, his neck bulged above a shirt collar that appeared to be at last a size too small, emphasising the grey stubble of a day's growth of beard, his protruding neck veins reminded her of the roots of the oriental fig tree she and Kate had seen at Kew last year. She was so fascinated by the policeman's appearance that she didn't notice that it had begun to rain.

The gendarme snapped his notebook closed and shook Raymond's hand. He turned and looked Zoe up and down, his eyes coming to rest on the outline of her breasts that were pushing up the cotton of her damp T-shirt. He reached out as though to caress them, but simply lifted Zoe's small gold crucifix and examined it. He winked, then turned to Raymond and made what sounded like a louche and sexist remark. Raymond laughed, the two shook hands and the gendarme joined his companion in the police car, which sped away into the traffic, its flashing blue light reflected a thousand times in the rainwater rippling across the cobblestones.

"I thought Canadians were above all that," snapped Zoe. "What is it about a pair of tits that men find so bloody fascinating?"

Raymond looked offended, "He just said that you look cold. He suggested I get you out of the rain and buy you a brandy."

"Why was he so interested in my crucifix?"

"He said that at least you'll be safe from vampires."

"There goes another rubbish myth."

Raymond opened the Vampire app on his iPhone and erased 'Crucifix' from the list they had made of possible vampire repellants.

"How about temperature?" Raymond asked, "According to Lomax, vampires are thermoconformers rather than thermoregulators. They adapt to the atmosphere around them. Are you cold?"

"I'm bloody freezing," said Zoe. "Let's find that brandy before the sun comes up and I turn into ashes."

Above the Paris roofs to the East, they could make out the tip of the Eiffel Tower outlined against brightening pink clouds. It was nearly dawn. Raymond looked worried as he opened another app on his phone. "April 2019... sunrise is at 7:16 today. We'll never make it back to your hotel in time. You need to find shelter."

Two men, one swarthy, round-faced and fat, the other tall, moustachioed and even thinner than the gendarme, dressed in starched white shirts, bow ties, black waistcoats and ankle-length aprons were carrying tables and chairs out of *La Manufacture* onto the footpath. Raymond collared the fat waiter who was arranging four chairs around a tiny table with geometrical precision.

"Excusez-moi garçon. La brasserie est-elle ouverte?"

"Bien sûr monsieur canadien. À l'intérieur ou terrasse?"

"We'll sit inside," said Raymond and hurried Zoe through the door to a booth in the rear of the café.

"What did he call you?" asked Zoe as she huddled into the corner seat. "Was he being rude?"

"He's a pig. Parisian waiters are always rude to Canadians. They think we have a barbarian accent." Raymond waved to the waiter, *"Un cognac et un chocolat chaud."*

"You're not having a brandy?" asked Zoe.

“I’m Canadian,” snapped Raymond, looking hurt.

Zoe looked around the café. Behind her was a typical brasserie bar, with a bewildering array of spirit and liqueur bottles ranged on two shelves in front of a mirror that took up the entire wall and reflected the patrons of the café, like the famous painting of *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, but instead of Manet’s buxom waitress, a teenage boy was operating the levers of a large espresso machine and passing small cups of steaming coffee to the first customers of the morning. He must be the *patron’s* son, putting in an hour’s work before school, she thought. A large woman (the *patron’s* wife?) emerged from the kitchen and dumped a tray of croissants and foot-long sticks of baguette on the zinc counter. The waiter handed her a slip of paper and she poured cognac into a small balloon glass at the same time as the young barista sent steam hissing and bubbling through the contents of a white china mug.

It was precisely at the moment when the waiter loaded glass and cup onto his tray and turned to face them at the back of the cafe that Zoe realised what was wrong with the picture. She wasn’t in it.

Raymond was clearly reflected in the mirror behind the bar, preoccupied with the menu; likewise she could see the faces of other patrons coughing over their first *Gauloises* of the day and remarking on the newspaper headline—the word ‘Brexit’ is readable in either direction; she could even make out two human-sized teddy bears draped over a table behind theirs, like drunken revellers. But ... Zoe pulled Raymond’s sleeve and pointed, “Look at the mirror” she whispered.

Raymond nodded, turned on his phone, reopened the Vampire app and tapped the box beside ‘No reflection.’ He looked back at Zoe, “For comparison’s sake, we should also

check to see if you cast a shadow.”

The waiter put the hot chocolate in front of Zoe and the cognac in front of Raymond, together with the bill. “*Service compris*,” he sneered.

Raymond swapped the cognac and chocolate. “Later,” he said dismissively, having decided to get his own back on the supercilious *garçon* by speaking English “We’ll order breakfast in a minute.” He turned to Zoe, “Are you hungry?”

“Famished.”

“What do vampires eat for breakfast?”

“What do you suggest? I can hardly sink my fangs into that waiter... Though it’s tempting.”

Raymond consulted the menu again, “They have *sanquette*, a bit like a *pâte* made from chicken or pig blood... not my cup of tea; *boudin noir*, that’s blood sausage, I’ve had that, it tastes a bit like lumps of coal; *bifteak au bleu*...”

“You choose,” said Zoe, “Just ask them to hold the garlic.”

While Raymond ordered, Zoe took the opportunity to peek at the mirror again and examine other details of the café: a blackboard menu, the old photographs of the *Gobelins* tapestry factory, the shelves loaded with books, bottles, teapots and bric-a-brac. “What’s with the bears?” she asked Raymond, pointing at the two enormous brown teddies flopped over the next table like hung-over party-goers and a third one sprawled like a vagrant against the railings of a spiral staircase leading down to the toilets.

“They’re called *Les nounours des gobelins*, they’re famous.”

“Really? Like Paddington Bear?”

“A few years ago some guy who owned a bookshop started the craze. He bought up a ton of teddy bears and began posing them up and down the street in shop windows and on railings. American tourists loved being photographed with

them. The travel mags picked it up and published articles about these *nounours* and *doudous*. It's become a cult: the bears have their own Facebook page, the bookseller has his own YouTube channel. It's got to the stage you can't walk down the *avenue des Gobelins* without tripping over the damn things.

Raymond polished off a 4-egg omelette and chips; Zoe tried to eat, but all the food on her plate tasted like sawdust and ashes. Raymond, who was still hungry, asked with Canadian politeness, "Do you mind?" and exchanged his empty plate for hers. Zoe watched her Canadian detective shovelling down the food, first with amusement, then with an increasingly morbid fascination. She found herself thinking how, a few days ago, she would have lusted after this handsome hunk: his muscular arms, his square jaw, his full head of hair, his intense eyes, the tuft of pale chest hair peeking above the open third button of his shirt, his sculpted neck with its prominent vein... She shook her head and looked down at her brandy glass to try and erase the image. Raymond was definitely a hunk, as handsome as any male model she'd Photoshopped into the pages of MangoShop or BEanICON, the kind of man she and Kate used to fantasise about over Friday night chardonnay and vol-au-vents in their local London pub. But now? No attraction. No sexy feelings at all. "Maybe he's gay," she said to herself. "Maybe gay men put out a protective aura of LGBTQ."

Yet there was something about him that *did* attract her; something else, something non-sexual was drawing her eyes back up to the gently throbbing vein below Raymond's masticating jaw, bulging with red, sweet, life-giving blood...

"Sun's out," said Raymond, breaking the spell. He pushed the plate away and belched politely into a napkin. "We have to work out how to get you back to the hotel without burning to

a crisp. Would an umbrella work, do you think?”

“A burqa maybe, with dark glasses.”

“Good idea!” Raymond perked up. “No wait, the French banned burqas a few years back. You’d be arrested.”

“Why don’t I pretend to be murdered and those guys in the grey coats could come back with their van and carry me out on a stretcher.”

“Or we could wrap you in a carpet, like Cleopatra...”

“You keep thinking about it,” said Zoe. “I’m busting for a pee. Where’s the crapper?”

Raymond frowned disapprovingly, “Sometimes, Zoe, you sound like an Australian. The Ladies Room is down the stairs over there.”

Zoe had to step over the prostrate, human-sized teddy bear in order to reach the spiral staircase that led down to the basement toilet block. At the bottom of the stairs was a circular room with a wash basin and a dirty towel on a runner. To her left was a door decorated with a silhouette of a man wearing a top hat. To her right the door simply indicated ‘Dames’. She pushed open the door and had to hold her breath against the stink that assailed her. The toilet was an ‘Egyptian’, a squatter and the previous users hadn’t been any too accurate. She found herself wondering whether waking up in the morgue was worse than having to use the toilet of a Paris brasserie before the cleaner had been through.

The sound of flushing came from behind the the Top Hat door, which opened to reveal the fat waiter, still zipping up his fly. The space was so tight that, in order to let him out of the cubicle, Zoe had to step into the ‘Dames’. The waiter mumbled something rude and turned his back on Zoe to use the hand basin. Once again, she found herself fixated on a man’s neck, this one bulging obscenely over his tight collar and

bow tie. It was as though her senses became hyper-responsive all at once: the pink flesh, the sour aroma of sweat mixed with the sweet smell of blood, pulsing... pounding... flowing like a swift rivulet... cascading like the great Latona Fountain of Versailles...

“Holy shit!” said Raymond, looking down on the blood-soaked tableau at the bottom of the stairs. The corpse of the waiter lay twisted beyond recognition on the floor of the washroom, his neck a bloody pulp, his chest torn open, revealing ribs and a still-beating heart. Blood splattered the walls and the ceiling. Raymond’s first thought was the creature crouching over the body, lapping up the last of the pulsing gore, must have been some wild animal escaped from the *Jardin zoologique*, until she looked up at him and pulled herself to her feet, shaking her head as though mystified about who and where she was.

“Zoe? What the fuck...?”

“I was hungry,” she answered defiantly. “Anyway, you said he was a pig.”

“This is a disaster,” said Raymond. “You employed me to find out what makes vampires tick—you seem to have answered the question yourself.”

“You have to help me.”

Raymond held his hands up and backed away up the steps. “Noooo. Lady, you’re on your own here! There’s nothing I can do to get you out of this.”

Zoe looked up at the tall private detective and a tear welled in her eye and coursed its way down her bloody cheek. “Please Raymond, if you don’t help me get back to the Hotel I won’t be able to pay you. All my money is in the safe... over a thousand pounds... you can have it all. Just get me out of

here.”

Raymond thought about it for fully 5 seconds. “Impossible,” he said and turned his back and began ascending the stair. But his foot slipped on a pool of blood and, reaching up to steady himself, he grabbed a limb of the teddy bear that was slouched against the railings and pulled it down onto his head. His feet went from under him and he landed on the next step down on his bottom with the bear doing an imitation of a nightclub lap dancer.

Zoe couldn’t help laughing. “Who’s your friend?” she asked.

Raymond thought again. “If she doesn’t get out of this, I’m in it up to my neck as well.”

“I think Ted’s come to your rescue,” said Raymond. He stood up and pulled up his left trouser leg, revealing a leather sheath strapped to his calf below the knee. He snapped open the clasp and extracted the longest, sharpest, meanest knife Zoe had ever seen.

“You’re going to kill me?” gasped Zoe. “Is that a Canadian thing to do?”

“When I was in my last year at school, I got a summer job as a lumberjack and my father gave me this bear-skinning knife as a present. I never had the chance to use it... until now.” Raymond picked up the teddy bear by one ear and, in one swift movement, slit its belly from neck to crotch. A cascade of foam rubber pellets erupted from the bear’s belly cavity, and Raymond began scooping out more and throwing down the stairs. He looked down at Zoe, “Help me! Quickly.”

Zoe joined him, reaching into the leg and arm tunnels and pulling out the stuffing. “Raymond, what are we doing?”

“Remember you suggested you could walk in the sunlight in a burqa?” he asked, “Well, Ted here is going to be your

burqa.”

“I’ll still be arrested,” said Zoe.

“Nonsense. What’s more normal in the tourist capital of the world, than a woman in a bear suit? No-one will give you a second glance.”

Five minutes later, the mid-morning patrons of *La Manufacture*, observed a tall American ascend from the underground restroom carrying a life-sized teddy bear under his arm. No-one thought it worth remarking on.

Google Maps shows two ways of travelling by public transport from the *avenue des Gobelins* in the 6th *Arrondissement* to the *Hotel de l’Arcade* in the 1st. The underground *Metro*, which would seem the safest means for a vampire making her way across Paris in daylight, involves a change of platform at *Les Pyramides* to line 14, direction *Gare St Lazare* to *Madeleine*, and then a 5 minute walk. Its disadvantage is that the *Metro* is by far the preferred means of transport for all the vampires of Paris and Zoe was nervous about meeting more of her kind until she had sorted out her future lifestyle. The N15 Bus, on the other hand, travelled directly between *les Gobelins* and *Madeleine*, crossing the River Seine at the *Île de la Cité*. Google estimates that both routes take about 30 minutes. The only problem with the bus was the question of whether vampire Zoe would be able to cross over water.

“Don’t you dare say, ‘We’ll cross that river when we come to it,’” said Zoe from inside the teddy bear.

“We’ll be stuck if water turns out to be a problem,” said Raymond.

“Maybe it will be different in a bus,” mumbled the teddy bear. “These rules were invented in the middle ages when they only had horses and carts.”

The N15 bus stop was 100 metres from the café and Raymond sat the teddy bear down on the bench, took off his baseball cap and mopped his brow. They both became aware of the sound of police sirens approaching and Raymond watched in horror as the two gendarmes from earlier in the morning drove their black Peugeot up onto the pavement and entered the café.

“What’s happening?” asked the bear.

“They must have found the body,” said Raymond. “There’ll be cops swarming everywhere in a minute.”

“When’s the bus due?”

“It should be here by now.”

“Maybe we should change to the Metro...”

“You guys are so cute!” A pink-haired American tourist in an orange tank top and lime-green culottes pushed her way through the pedestrians towards Raymond and his life-sized teddy bear. “I have to take a selfie!” She shrieked, expanding a telescopic stick with mobile phone attached and sat down between them, throwing one arm around Zoe and extending the selfie stick. “Now smile!... Not you, of course Teddy.”

“We have to go,” said Raymond.

“When I was a little girl I had a big Ted just like you and a little Ted I would take to school...”

The thin gendarme emerged from the front door of *La Manufacture* accompanied by one of the patrons who pointed up the street. The gendarme began stopping passers-by, who also began pointing, but they were indicating half a dozen identical teddy bears in the *avenue des Gobelins* slouched in shop windows or seated at the tables of other outdoor cafés. At that moment, the N15 bus made its appearance, pulling up with a hiss at the stop.

“Excuse us, we must be going,” Raymond pushed the selfie

woman aside, picked up Zoe from the bench and elbowed his way onto the bus.

“Hey!” shouted the woman, waving her hand which was dripping with blood. “Your teddy is bleeding! You should have him seen to.”

“I’m taking him to the hospital now,” shouted Raymond as the doors closed and the bus set off and turned out of sight into the Boulevard Saint-Marcel. (Later that day, acting on evidence from Miss Brenda-Maree Bosquiat of Squirrel Oaks, Idaho, Inspector Mensonge of the Paris Sureté led an unsuccessful raid on the University Hospital *Pitié-Salpêtrière*, looking for a man with a wounded teddy bear.)

To cut a long story short, the bus trip went smoothly without further incident. They found that vampires could travel across water without difficulty—at least in a bus—and Raymond was able to cross another vampire legend off his iPhone app. Because they were seated unobtrusively at the back of the bus, Zoe was able to raise the bear’s head sufficiently for Raymond to describe the sights of Paris by day. As they crossed the Seine at the Pont St Michel he pointed out the the sights: the stone bridges, the police headquarters, the buttressed gothic walls and spire of the Notre Dame Cathedral.

By evening, the mysteries of the man with a stake in his heart and the exsanguinated waiter in the *Gobelins* district were forgotten when Donald Trump issued a series of tweets threatening to tax French cheese and wine.

Forgotten by everyone but Louis Raymond and Zoe Evans, who was sound asleep, hanging upside down from a railing in the wardrobe of Room 666 at the Hotel de l’Arcade, 1ère Arrondissement, Paris

chapter seventeen

Kimberlee Gerstmann

ONE HAND ON THE mouse, the other bent at the elbow holding up his drooping head, Raymond struggled to keep his eyes open. The heat in the office kicked on, lulling him into a state of severe drowsiness. Earlier in the day, he felt exhausted, but the sudden whoosh of warm air brought a new level to his fatigue and caused him to yawn several times in succession.

Jesus, it's April. Why is the heat still cranked?

He remembered turning the heat up when Zoe last visited the office. She always complained about the cold. *Being around her is impacting me more than I thought.* He crossed to the thermostat and slid it to the lowest temperature.

He shook his head and returned to his desk. He did not want to be distracted by Zoe while the work literally piled up around him. Raymond trolled his finger down the stack of files to his left. He selected a file (mid-pile) that stuck out at the corner. He held the rest of the files as he slid out the chosen folder and took a look at the name on the label. Montgomery.

Ah, the redhead and the pharmacist.

He flipped through the photos of the lovers he'd first observed and later captured on camera. That case consumed him for days, but that was two weeks ago. Another lifetime, it seemed. He typed up an invoice for the hours spent, the iced teas he sipped in the bar of the hotel, the printing of the photos, and the other miscellaneous expenses. The charges for Mrs. Montgomery added up to a substantial amount. Raymond felt sorry for the poor woman. Not only would she find out her husband was cheating, but she'd have to pay mightily to do so. Tiny pangs of sympathy caused him to go back and eliminate some of the soft expenses and reduced her bill a bit. *Not all men are heartless.*

Yawn.

Type. Type. Type.

He worked on the final paragraph of the Montgomery report until another yawn escaped, causing him to enter a string of nonsense words across the screen. He deleted the errant copy letter by letter, nearly missing the sound of the outer office door closing. He looked up from the computer but did not immediately see who was in the office. He heard whispered voices near the empty reception desk, but only saw shadows through the glass of the door.

Raymond pushed himself away from the desk and stood. Two scruffy people walked through the doorway, surprising Raymond with their boldness. One was tall and thin with the beginnings of dark facial hair trying to cover a pockmarked complexion, the other was short and incredibly stocky with several piercings. Raymond assumed they were both men, but upon second inspection, he surmised the short stocky one might be a woman. Not that it mattered. He was more concerned with their temperament than their gender.

"Can I help you?" Raymond asked the pair.

Stocky took a seat on the grey couch while Pockmark blocked the doorway. Neither said a word. An overpowering smell of cheap body wash filled the room. Raymond felt a prickle of unease course through his body. He felt exhausted but became very alert and suddenly wished he had some sort of weapon in his desk. He crossed his arms and stared at the intruders.

“We were sent to give you a... uh... an invitation I guess you’d call it,” Pockmark stated. His accent sounded decidedly American.

Stocky nodded and played with the piercing in their bottom lip.

“Go on,” Raymond said. He hoped that he was able to convey a false note of indifference.

Pockmark continued, “Our boss, Mr. G, wants you to meet with him this evening.”

“Mr. G?” Raymond asked.

“G. As in George Gordon. You know him.”

Raymond paused, trying to calm himself in spite of the major freak out he was having internally. “I am familiar.”

“Yeah, well, uh, Mr. G sez that you and, uh, your client... Zoe?” Pockmark looked at Stocky for confirmation. Stocky nodded. “Yeah. You and Zoe should meet up wid him tonight. Like I said befores.”

“First of all, why would I agree to meet him? And second, why should I trust you or him?” Raymond countered.

Pockmark shrugged, “On account of you did some things and pissed Mr. G off, so you might’n want to fix it wid him.”

Stocky nodded for the third time.

“The rest, I dunno. But it’s uh... in your... whadda-ya-call-it... best interest to do right by Mr. G.” Pockmark looked proud of himself for remembering the term.

“I’ll have to talk to Zoe,” Raymond said. “I’ll agree to meet. But only in public. I don’t trust him.”

“That’s probably smart,” Pockmark agreed.

“Tell your boss that we’ll meet him at 8 o’clock at Demitri’s.”

Pockmark sucked his front teeth and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“Better be there,” Pockmark stated before turning to leave.

Stocky stood and nodded.

Raymond watched the two leave his office. He followed and locked the door behind them. He did not want any other visitors. He grabbed his cell and called Zoe.

One hand on the mouse, the other bent at the elbow holding up his drooping head, Raymond struggled to keep his eyes open. The heat in the office kicked on, lulling him into a state of severe drowsiness. Earlier in the day, he felt exhausted, but the sudden whoosh of warm air brought a new level to his fatigue and caused him to yawn several times in succession.

Jesus, it’s April. Why is the heat still cranked?

He remembered turning the heat up when Zoe last visited the office. She always complained about the cold. Being around her is impacting me more than I thought. He crossed to the thermostat and slid it to the lowest temperature.

He shook his head and returned to his desk. He did not want to be distracted by Zoe while the work literally piled up around him. Raymond trolled his finger down the stack of files to his left. He selected a file (mid-pile) that stuck out at the corner. He held the rest of the files as he slid out the chosen folder and took a look at the name on the label. Montgomery.

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“Tell your boss that we’ll meet him at 8 o’clock at Dimitri’s.”

Pockmark sucked his front teeth and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“Better be there,” Pockmark stated before turning to leave.

Stocky stood and nodded.

Raymond watched the two leave his office. He followed and locked the door behind them. He did not want any other visitors; especially a couple of losers like those. Returning to his desk, he sank into the chair. A blur of post-stress adrenalin flooded his system and he felt a fit of slow anger build in his stomach. A couple of low-class goons tried to intimidate him, and it worked. He was furious for allowing it to happen. He longed for the relatively simple days of the Montgomery case. At least that was a simple betrayal. Nothing life or death (or undead). Hands shaking, he grabbed his cell and called Zoe.

What have I gotten myself into?

Raymond arrived at Dimitri’s a few minutes before Zoe. He asked for a table where he could see the door and have no one come up behind him. He watched patrons come and go, some taking out food for an evening at home, others coming in as couples or small groups. He was the only solo diner. As he watched the steady parade of customers, he thought that they might look at him in return and imagine him waiting for a date to arrive.

As if on cue, Raymond caught sight of Zoe through the far window. When she came through the door, he raised his hand

to wave, and she spotted him before he had a chance.

She slid her pink jacket off her slight frame, and he smiled at the t-shirt revealed beneath. Bite Me, it read. *Fitting*.

A too-perky waitress whisked over to their table.

“Something to drink while you wait for the rest of your party?” she asked.

“A Bloody Mary,” Zoe replied.

Raymond waited for Zoe to smile over her inside joke, but she did not. She barely made eye contact with the waitress and her lack of pleasantries surprised him.

“Rum and Coke for me,” he said and gave the waitress one of his megawatt smiles.

It worked. The waitress beamed and left the table.

“What’s up?” he asked Zoe.

“I’m so incredibly tired,” she replied.

He took note of the dark half-moons beneath her eyes. She looked like he felt.

“And I’m not sure that I am ready for this meetup if I’m being completely honest,” she said.

“If it makes you feel any better, I am not ready either.”

“Nope. That does not make me feel even one percent better,” she answered. This time, she did give him a wan smile.

He started to return the smile but saw George Gordon at the door and any inkling of good humor left him in an instant.

As George entered the restaurant, it felt like everyone grew quiet. The din of tableware hitting plates and bowls fell silent. Friendly chatter reduced to whispers. While George Gordon was nothing much to look at, Raymond supposed that the very essence of vampirism carried with it a certain magnetism. While George wove his way between the tables, people

resumed their prior discussions and exuberance once he passed.

Raymond felt the tug of interest as George stood before them. It was difficult to picture this heavysset guy as a mob boss of sorts. To Raymond, George could easily be compared to Cupid as opposed to a swarthy vampire.

“Are you going to invite me to join you?” George asked.

Raymond looked at Zoe. She shrugged.

“Rules,” she said.

“Please, sit,” Raymond said.

George pulled the chair from the table and sat. The legs squealed against the floor as he scooted forward.

The waitress returned with Zoe and Raymond’s drinks. She hovered near the table but did not come the last two feet. A strange look passed over her features as she stared at George. He did not look up.

“I won’t be having anything,” he stated.

That seemed to break the trance the waitress was in. She came forward and set the drinks in front of Zoe and Raymond, and scurried away, not asking them if they wanted to order anything else.

“Garlic,” George commented. “Everything here is tainted with it.”

Raymond gave a mental hurrah. *At least I did something right.*

“Let me get right to the point,” George started. “I need the two of you to stop your reign of terror on my *people*.”

Raymond gave him what he hoped was a blank look.

“Don’t feign innocence, Raymond. You killed two of mine already. I need it to stop. You don’t want to piss me off any further or believe me, you will regret it.”

Raymond swallowed hard. He looked to Zoe to gauge her reaction. Her green eyes seemed to be bright with fury focused

on George Gordon. *If looks could kill.*

Zoe refused to speak. Her fingers drummed on the table in front of her.

Raymond took a sip of his drink and watched the two vampires try to stare each other down. To him, it felt like an eternity passed before George finally blinked.

“I need to leave. The smell is making me sick,” George said.

Zoe shifted her eyes. She twirled a celery stalk in her drink.

“Do we understand each other?” George asked.

Raymond felt uncertain. They had not discussed anything in detail. Just George’s commandment. *What would they receive in return?* He waited for Zoe to take the lead. She remained silent.

“Good. It’s agreed.” George stood and almost knocked the chair over. He glared at it and rested a thick hand on its back. He turned and walked out of the restaurant.

After the door closed, Raymond turned to Zoe.

“What the hell was that?” he asked.

“That,” she started, “was George Gordon.”

“Obviously,” he replied, frustrated with her lack of explanation.

“We can’t trust him,” she said.

Raymond rolled his eyes. *As if I would ever trust him in the first place.*

“He’s not going to stop,” she said.

The flatness in her voice gave Raymond a chill. The fire in her green eyes had dulled as well.

“I think you need to leave town for a little while. It is not safe for you.”

Raymond didn’t want to immediately show his discomfort. He took a long swig of his drink.

“Whatever you say,” he replied.

chapter eighteen

LG Red

ZOE SLOPPED HER GLASS of wine on Kate. “You’re all plot,” she said. “Your arse is so tight you couldn’t take a shit without plotting it out first. For me, a story is — you go in there, you meet your characters and you see where they take you.”

“Right,” Kate said, her voice tight. Zoe expected her to pour white wine, then soda water on the spreading wine stain. From her face, she was damned if he would. Still... cashmere...

“I mean, look at Nôtre Dame. Who’d have thought there were beehives on the roof?” said Kate. “Wouldn’t you use that?”

Stop! Stop, Zoe, she told herself. The conversation is in my head. Kate is dead. Poor Kate’s body was in the morgue behind her, lying on a slab.

Zoe herself was now a vampire, and had just concluded the weirdest conversation of her life... her death, she reminded herself — with pleasantly-plump vampire mob boss George Gordon.

Her face, actually, was pressed against the wood of a

gigantic door. Oak, her mind informed her. From Forêt de l'Oise. *Blood from a thousand sacrifices soak my every knot, my sisters make the roof of their accursed cathedral...* the wood spat.

Oh come on. Nonsense. Doors don't talk to me. Zoe stepped briskly back and slipped her iPhone from the pocket of her jeans. She googled 'Paris Morgue', and found it immediately. Institut médico-légal de Paris was on quai de la Rapée, in the 12th arrondissement. "Easy peasy," she said aloud, pleased. The route back to the hotel was all along the quays northwest, then, hop, turn right along fontaine des Mers — carefully skirting the water, oh, no, no, she wasn't crossing any water, no sirree, she'd heard about that. Then it was straight up place de la Concorde to the Madeleine (*A temple to the Revolution, till those Christian bastards stole it* said the door, crackling on the word 'Chêtiens').

God, she felt great. She stepped through the door — without opening it, she noticed as the phone dropped out of her hand and smacked on the floor inside. She stepped back through, kicked it under the door and picked it up again outside.

"OK, Zoe," she said, and set off confidently northwest. After a few steps she screeched to an unnerved halt. "Oh, fuck!" The water was on her right, meaning she was on the left bank. She'd have to cross it to get back to the hotel.

A passing lady tut-tut-tutted, and muttered "Pas bien-élevé!"

Well, fuck me sideways, I understand French now! "Va te faire enculer!" she suggested, and the stiff hairstyle of the woman crimped even further as she stiffened and stalked away.

Okaaaay, Zoe told herself. I can do this. I can't cross water, obv. But there has to be a workaround. God, she was starving.

She turned in a circle, and stopped, entranced. The Eiffel

Tower was doing its thing - lit up for the evening. As she watched, it went from plain lighting to a joyous sparkle from top to bottom of the tower that lit up the Paris sky.

“Height,” she said. “If I get up high enough I can cross, I’m sure.”

A slim, tall man turned back as he passed her. “You want to go high?”

“No,” Zoe said absently, looking at the pulse throbbing in his throat, such a beautiful pulse— “No drugs, thank you.” She licked her lips. Maybe just a little sip?

He threw his head back and laughed, showing that beautiful pulsing throat to its best advantage. Zoe gasped and fixed her eyes on his lips. “Madame, les montgolfiers, the hot air balloonists, are making expeditions for all those who love Paris, from la cathédrale Nôtre-Dame, beside us here, across to place de la Concorde this evening.”

“Perfect!” She drew her eyes away reluctantly and he went on his way, leaving a lingering scent of lavender and fresh blood tormenting her nostrils. She gulped away her mouthwatering and made confidently for the cathedral.

She expected to feel fear, perhaps a burning sensation, illness, as she approached that home of Christianity, but felt nothing except a slightly queasy tummy. And there they were — two balloons swaying in the moonlight, with a long queue of tourists waiting, licking their ice creams from Berthillon. Her awakened senses smelt cassis, black chocolate, créole vanilla.

But something was bothering her. Something she could hear but not see. A whistle, a soft whistle, whistling a tune she remembered from her childhood. Her mind sounded out the words:

O, I met with Napper Tandy, and he took me by the hand

*Saying 'How is poor old Ireland and how does she stand?'
'She's the most distressful country that ever yet was seen,
For they're hanging men and women for the wearing of the green.'*

She turned. A man was close behind her, she saw the gleam of his teeth as he ducked out of an archway. She hurried a little.

He was still there, at the same distance. And he was wearing green, she saw as he passed under a street light. A green coat, a high white stock around his throat, fawn trousers and rather flashy buckled shoes. His face was somehow ghastly, his cheeks hollow and his eyes — as green as her own — haunted, and fixed on her.

She stood transfixed. He stopped. A man came out of a house and stopped too, by the man following. He held a sprig of springing green oak in his hand.

The man in green gave a broad grin of delight. "My man Polidori!"

"What do I hold in my hand?" the man Polidori asked the man in green.

"A green bough."

"Where did it spring?"

"In the United States of America."

"Where did it bud?"

"In France."

"Where will you plant it?"

"In the crown of England."

As the man in green reached gladly to take the twig, Zoe saw a flash as he fell, clutching a throat from which gore poured, reddening his white stock. The other man, the man he had called Polidori, turned and smiled at Zoe confidently. "We English 'ave to look after each other, Zoe," he said. He wiped the knife on his trousers and jumped for her.

She ran.

She raced past the tourists, gasping. They all turned to watch her, but as she cried, “Help me! Help me!” They stared, turned their heads slowly and backed away.

Zoe saw the balloons swaying above their baskets, ahead of her, the nearest with a Union Jack flirting on the billowing silk. She got her hands on the basket and hauled herself in — weren’t there sandbags or something you threw out to make it rise? — but there was nothing, apart from herself the basket was empty. Another man was running towards her, shouting “Hé! Arrête ça!” But ahead of him was — she felt herself towed — the man with the knife. He was pulling the rope of the balloon’s anchor hand-over-hand, that smile still fixed on his face.

She grabbed the rope — bringing herself nearer to Polidori — but then she saw the flame feeding the hot air into the balloon. She dragged the rope up and held it in the flames, hissing at the pain, and it burned through faster than she could have imagined. She let go and the balloon jumped into the air.

The owner jumped from below, wailing in despair “Halte! Halte! Voleuse!” and the crowd surged forward, shouting too, knocking the knifeman to the ground. She held the edge of the basket as the balloon soared up and over the river — not a bother on me, she gloated as it flew just above the surface of the river, then up again.

Far below, the knifeman Polidori was racing towards the bridge. He crossed halfway and looked up. The tut-tutting woman passed him by. With a relaxed gesture he reached over, wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and sank his teeth into her throat. Zoe stared down, hunger and disgust fighting in her, her mouth again watering. “Don’t be stupid,” she muttered to herself, “he’d be drinking my blood next.”

The balloon was sinking — she could see place de la Concorde ahead — when she heard a pop, then another, and the basket jerked. The breeze turned — she was being blown back. “No, no, no, no, no!” There must be some way of steering the thing. She pulled at the ropes, but that made the air spill out faster. It caught on the north tower of Nôtre Dame and sagged there. In the basket, she was perhaps five metres from the ground.

Polidori was still lounging on the bridge, tucking, she saw, a neat pistol into his waist.

She got over the edge of the basket, than hand-over-hand on what was left of the burned anchor rope; she was still a balcony’s length from the ground. She let go and fell. The balloon surged upwards a little, snagged again.

She ran, but the cathedral’s grounds were confusing, guarded with railings and walls. The knifeman walked around outside, smiling in at her.

“Get away from me, you,” she said. “I have a bargain with Gordon.”

“Byron?” Polidori’s smile widened. “Many’s the woman who trusted that fellow and soon found out her mistake. *My days are in the yellow leaf; the flowers and fruits of love are gone; the worm—the canker, and the grief, are mine alone!*” he said, and sniggered.

She vaguely recognised the verse. “Oh stop this,” she told him. “What do you want from me?”

“Let me introduce myself,” he said, with a fancy twirl of his hand and a sweeping bow. “John William Polidori’s the name. Duelling’s my business. I challenge you—” and he peeled off one black chamois glove and slapped her lightly on one cheek and then the other, letting the glove drop between them— “to a duel this night.”

“Are you out of your tiny mind?”

It was then that she realised that she was standing beside the holy water font. She edged closer to it.

Polidori made no answer, but pulled the pistol he had shot to puncture the balloon and the knife with which he had cut the green man’s throat from his waistband, and offered them to her. “Choice of weapons?”

She was close enough to the font to scent its nasty pong. She wrapped her hand in her sleeve, took the scoop and scooped it full, and flung the blessed water full in his face.

He shook the water away. “Oh, my dear, leave aside these childish superstitions.” He stooped for the discarded glove, wiped his face with it, and put it on again. “Choose your weapon, madam.”

Gun, knife? Don’t bring a knife to a gunfight! Obv! She grabbed the gun, turned and fled through the door of Nôtre Dame and up the nave. The knife whipped past her cheek as she turned her head to look for a hiding place, and buried itself in a writhing figure of Jesus on the cross.

Zoe crouched between two pews, sighted the gun and waited for him to come into view. No sign. Then a sound behind her. She whipped around and squeezed the trigger. A click. Nothing.

Polidori, smirking, pulled a pouch from his pocket. “Perhaps you forgot that you need gunpowder? And bullets? And a flint?” He opened his red mouth wide and laughed and laughed.

Zoe flung the gun at him and ran. She slid, rounded a corner and side-galloped behind a tapestry wreathed with flowers and fruit. She peered through, her cheek against the rough back of the tapestry, the ancient wool smell catching in the back of her throat. He was crossing the cathedral, his back

to her, looking from side to side. He opened the door of a confessional — “Come on out, wherever you are!”

She squeezed her eyes half-shut and looked to her left. A stone staircase led up — up, she supposed, to the choir loft. She tiptoed along the tapestry, stopping to see his progress. Once he turned and looked — it seemed straight at her — then went on.

She edged out from behind the tapestry. Her foot was on the first stair when he called, “Ah! There you are, my dear! How nice!”

Her legs felt as if they were seizing up, so slow, and she could hear him leaping up behind her, lithe and brisk. The stair stopped at a railed gate. Fuck! But then she remembered the oak door and stepped through. Bang! Her nose throbbed. Metal didn’t co-operate like wood.

Up here! a voice whispered. Up here! Up to the forest!

She looked up. A column of oak spiralled upwards. She jumped, jumped again, reaching up to it. His footsteps pounded up towards her, his breath harsh. Her fingers touched stone, centimetres away from the wood.

Come on! Come up!

She could still hear him coming. His breath was rasping in his throat.

She jumped again, scrabbled, clawed, and touched the wood, and as soon as her hand touched it she was grabbed up — just as his hand closed on her ankle — no, her shoe—

She curled into a ball and dug her nails into the oak, swarming up and up like a sailor up a mast. Below, the man cursed — “Corny-faced blouseabella fusscock!” and the knife came again, clattering against the stone and falling back on him. She heard him jump aside and she laughed, and the cramps went out of her legs.

She was high on the parapet, outside the cathedral — without knowing it, she had followed the line of oak. The envelope of the balloon bobbed lazily against the wall, just below her feet. She sat on the parapet, dangled her legs over and admired Paris — the Eiffel Tower was doing its sparkly thing again, or maybe it had never stopped. She laughed.

“What’s so funny, little thingumbob?”

“Ah, for fuck’s sake, not you again?” There he was, towering above her, but now she felt little fear of him. She reached to push him off, but he gripped his fingers, biting into her wrist and drew the soft inner flesh up towards his face. She felt herself lifted, and with the instinct and training of a Chelsea girl, gave him a sharp knee in the balls.

He staggered back, hissing, holding his hands protectively over the part.

Zoe monkey-streaked up to a flat place on the roof with — oddly — three cupboards set there. Oh, wait. There was something about those cupboards with their legs and their pointed rooves...

Polidori followed, climbing with his back rather humped. He rolled onto the roof and lay there retching. “Fustypugs!” he choked. “Gnashgab!” He pulled himself up, supporting his weight on the roof of one of the cupboards. An angry hum came from inside.

“Oh, I wouldn’t!” Zoe backed away.

“Wouldn’t you, gobbermouth?” He launched a kick at her, and hit the cupboard.

“No! No!” But too late. A jet of bees swarmed out of first the cupboard — beehive — he had kicked and then the other two. They circled Zoe, ignored her and went straight for Polidori. He screamed, and staggered away.

The balloon took that moment to detach itself and float

upwards, and Polidori, seeing the silk, grabbed at it and whirled to wrap himself in it, while the bees attacked and backed and found new places to crawl in.

The basket, and the burner, came creeping over the edge. “No!” shouted Zoe again. “Fire!”

Polidori clawd his head free, and when he saw the fire catching on the silk he turned his eyes to her, and opened his mouth in the maddest laugh she had ever heard. “The fire will consume you too!” he said. “Fire will turn you to ash!”

As if his words were prophetic, the flames reached him, and half his face melted away, while the second half, in a scream that ended in a whisper, cried “Ash—”

But then — Zoe looked again. He had freed himself. He smashed through a stained glass window, the blood-red glass reflecting the scarlet flames, and disappeared into an attic filled with holy debris. His voice echoed back — “Fumblecunt! Glimbag!”

The flames were spreading fast. Trapped, Zoe put her hand on the wood of the hive he had kicked, and it spoke to her. *Leap! Leap now, and my ladies will carry you!*

She danced on the flames, but they were rising further. Inside, there was a roar. She could see the tourists below gathering to stare up, some kneeling and singing. A fragment of a hymn they were singing floated upwards. What the hell, she said. I’m as dead as I’m going to be.

She ran to the edge of the tower and jumped, and spread her arms and legs as if she were flying. And then she was, borne up by the bees of the cathedral, a million whirring wings carrying her across the river to float her down gently on place de Concorde.

chapter nineteen

Curtis Beaird

SIRENS SCREAM. EMERGENCY HORNS blare . Blue lights flash their warning. The Cathedral of Notre Dame is burning!

The spire, long pointing to heaven, becomes a candle stick of flame. The base succumbing to the heat frightfully buckles and falls into the roof. Hell has come calling.

Zoe, history's only haunted vampire and arch enemy of George, shrugs and walks away from the scene singing. "They fell into a burning ring of fire. They went down down down as the flames reached higher. Burn. Burn Burn."

Now laughing, not out loud but to herself, Zoe picks up her pace. But, it got away from her. Her private laugh turned to a public cackle. Anyone could hear her and they did.

The others, and those on the street standing, were trapped in the horror of that moment when the unthinkable attacked the spirit of the holy, and turned to stare at the women with the flaming eyes.

Zoe tried to slow herself, but could not. Her glee melted into silence when she heard it. One of them shouted, "What's wrong with her? Another one said, "That is someone's

daughter.” Notre Dame is burning.

Away from the maddening crowd, Zoe slowed. Her shoulders slumped. The orange of the fire that earlier stole away the black night gave way once more to the dark. It wrapped itself around her now like a heavy coat. Usually, the black of night was her friend. It gave her comfort. It gave her space to move through time. It offered her opportunity. Usually, in that dismal shroud, she found life.

That is, until the woman in tears shouted. “She is someone’s daughter!”

The Burn! Burn! Burn! that moments earlier lit her eyes with only the joy a vampire in the throws of destruction can know, was pushed aside by that part of herself that was supposed to be dead. That part of herself that longed once more for the light of day. “She is someone’s daughter.”

But, what about the elements? Earth. Wind. Fire. Blood. Sweat. Tears. What about the elements? Zoe screamed her question into the inky dark that no longer offered even a hint of the blaze. “We are of the earth, earthy. From it we sprang, to it we shall return.” What kind of mother says things like that?

“Come on Zoe.” Now alone on the city street and feeling free to do her normal self talk out loud so she could hear herself clearly.

“Come on Zoe” Get with the program. Number one - you are a vampire. Number two - you do have an odd interest in wondering if the methods of killing vampires really works. What’s up with that? Do you have some odd suicide wish? Number three....You may be of the earth, earthy. You may have sprung from it. But, to it you will never return.” And the comfort of her night turned to the bleak sadness that it can for

any other ordinary person.

Words words. Just words. Back in the world of reality, Zoe had bagged two vampires before the fire. It was her little experiment. At least she knew for sure that the Lone Ranger routine with a silver bullet to the heart would work. It was certainly more to her liking than the stake to the heart. That worked, but way to messy for a perfectionist who once dated a guy from Transylvania.

Zoe began to giggle just a bit. She reflected on that one vampire that freaked when she tossed a handful of salt on the table in front of her.

If Zoe wrote it up in her diary, the bottom line would read like this. “ The last time I saw Shara, she was lost in frantically counting each grain of salt. You know how it is with us vampires, we are driven to it. Thankfully, we aren’t troubled with counting the hairs on our head. But, then I wonder if you can drive a vampire crazy with such strategy. Wonder if Sara is still sitting at that table. There was a lot of salt.

Let’s face it. George Gordon was a dork. He was Zoe’s arch enemy to be sure, but a dork. George was supposed to be the big bad wolf or rather the big bad vampire in charge of the swizzle stick vampires that Zoe managed to off. He was supposed to be invincible .

I know dear reader. It is hard to believe that Zoe, even with her hint of pyromania, could kill anyone or anything. I mean she, like everyone, had a sweet mother who taught her wonderful things that would haunt her all her days. Soul talk is like that. And, I’m told that mothers tend to share those sorts of things. (Granted. None of us would want Zoe anywhere near our neck. But, that is her dark side, as they say.)

Anyway, George really aggravated Zoe when he welched

on the deal. I guess, like thieves, there is no honor among vampires, either. The deal? Simple. Zoe would stop killing his underlings and he would let her become Queen of the Vampires. But, after the fire and her mothers memories and the little talk she had with herself, she was not so sure that was a good deal. And, besides MMM was more than a decent person and she had no interest in bringing him to the dark side, which in itself was a puzzle. But, that is another story, as they say. So, to square things, she would allow George to make her day.

While Zoe liked Louis and had more than a few fond memories of her Mom, she was a very straight forward person. While it was near dawn, she still thought a trip to George's office would be worth it.

She tried the door. Of course it was locked. So, she broke it. How. A small crowbar. It was going to be her next test instrument on what would certainly be another of George's swizzle stick vampires. "Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust." The stuff Zoe remembered. The stuff her mother said. Ashes indeed.

Once inside. You guessed it. Big George is sitting behind his big leather desk in his big chair with a big grin on his big face.

"George. You need to lay off the Smirnoff, boy. Your big red nose more than hints enough time swizzling the suds."

He laughs and laughs and laughs his big bully laugh that only the Big Bad Wolf could manage when thinking he is hearing from one of his underlings.

"Tell you what, George. Why don't I take this handy little crowbar of mine and see if I can toss the straight sharp end right through your heart."

George doesn't flinch. He doesn't blink. He did stop laughing. He moved his arms to the side. Opened his coat. Took the index finger of his right hand and moved it to the area of his heart.

"Sweet little Zoe. Here's how it goes down. Flip it if you will. I won't even try to stop your throw. But, you need to know this. You are of my blood line. Kill me and you will be gone before I am. Have at it."

Zoe remembered a song her mother loved. "When the Lights Went Out in Georgia." She never quite had a since of that song until that moment. Granted she could see enough of the dawn through the seams of the curtains to know the day and the light of it was about to flood the world. But, at that moment she felt more than lost in her own private dark night.

"Man, you are some kind of hard on a door. That is going to tick off the superintendent having to replace that knob and facing. Why didn't you just knock?" Louis slams the office door hard against the wall. "You got more plans for that crowbar?"

Zoe dropped it to the floor.

Raymond steps to the blinds and holds them at the draw point. You don't mind if we put a little light on the subject do you?"

Zoe screams, "No!" George Gordon never made it to his feet before the blinds were snatched open. Light. Wall to wall light. The pure light of a blue sky day floods the room. Ashes to ashes.

Louis helps Zoe to the black leather couch and sits beside her. Leans back. Relaxes and unbuttons his collar.

“ You do know that move could have turned me into what we now see of the Big Bad Wolf, don’t you?”

“Zoe. There was no risk. Whether you know it or not. There is more soul left in you than you think.”

Zoe leans forward. Looks Louis straight in the face. “Tell you what. Why don’t we open the windows and see what our friend the wind won’t do with the Big Bad Wolf?”