

BLOOD DEBT

Tanya Huff

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~~CARL HAD AN AWARENESS OF HIS OWN POWER THAT WAS ALMOST VAMPIRIC. . . .~~

All this is mine, it declared. You are nothing unless I choose to make use of you.

Vicki almost killed him before she brought the sudden surge of rage under control. "I am nothing like you," she snarled, ignoring hands that clawed at her wrist. "I only want to ask you a few questions." A silk-covered heel caught her just below the knee. "Stop it."

Carl stopped. He glared at her through narrowed eyes, fingers wrapped around her wrist, chest rising and falling in short, shallow breaths. *Death is my weapon, his expression said. Not yours.*

Vicki let more of the Hunger rise, barely stopping it from breaking free. "Organ-legging. Are you doing it?"

"No." His answer was little more than a breath rasped out in denial. But for all he might deny Death in the silvered eyes that held his, he couldn't lie to them. Nor could he look away.

"Do you know who is?"

"No." *Go on, his gaze dared. Do your worst.*

Frustrated, she threw him to the bed. He bounced, rolled across the quilted red satin bedspread, and come up firing a .22-caliber automatic pistol. . . .

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OF DARKNESS, LIGHT AND FIRE

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One

“HOW are you feeling?”

The young man attempted a shrug but didn't have the energy to actually lift his shoulders. “M okay,” he muttered, watching the doctor warily. The incision throbbed, and he was too tired to take a piss without the huge orderly holding his pecker, but he wasn't going to tell the doctor that. Some people said he had authority problems. So what.

He had his money; all he wanted now was a chance to spend it. “When can I go?”

“Go?”

“Leave,” he growled.

“That's what I came in to tell you.” Her face expressionless, she stepped away from the bed. “You'll be leaving this afternoon.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

When she was gone, he swung his legs out from under the covers and carefully lowered them to the floor. Straightening slowly, he released the rail and stepped forward. The room whirled. He would have fallen except that a beefy hand wrapped around his arm and effortlessly kept him upright.

“You walk too fuckin' quietly, man,” he said, turning to face the orderly. “Damn near scared me to d. . .”

The last word got lost in sudden pain as the fingers tightened.

“Hey, man! You're hurting me!”

“I know.” Something glittered in the depths of soft brown eyes, something usually buried beneath an expression of unquestionable docility.

The setting sun brushed molten gold over the waves of English Bay, gilded a pair of joggers on Sunset Beach Park, traced currents of gleaming amber between the shores of False Creek, shone through the tinted glass on the fourteenth floor of the Pacific Place condominium tower and into the eyes of a young man who sighed as he watched it set. Nestled between the mountains and the Strait of Georgia, Vancouver, British Columbia, enjoyed some of the most beautiful sunsets in the world—but that had nothing to do with the young man's sigh.

Lifting a hand to shade his face, Tony Foster stared out the window and counted down the minutes. At 7:22 P.M., his watch alarm began to buzz. Pale blue eyes still locked on the horizon, he shut it off and cocked his head back toward the interior of the condominium, listening for the sounds that would tell him the night had truly begun.

Lying in a darkness so complete it could only be deliberate, Henry Fitzroy shook off the bindings of the sun. The soft sound of the cotton sheet moving against the rise and fall of his chest told him he had safely survived another day. As he listened, the rhythmic whisper became lost in the heartbeat waiting in the room beyond his bolted door and then in the myriad noises of the city beyond the walls of his sanctuary.

He hated the way he woke, hated the extended vulnerability of his slow return to full consciousness. Every evening he tried to shorten the time he spent lying helpless and semiaware. It didn't seem to do

any good, but the effort made him feel less impotent.

He could feel the sheet lying against his skin, the utter stillness of the air. . . .

And a sudden chill.

Which was impossible.

He'd had the air conditioner disconnected in this, the smallest of the three bedrooms. The window had been blocked with plywood, caulked, and curtained. The door had flexible rubber seals around all four sides—not air-tight by any means, but the cracks were far too small to allow such a rapid change in temperature.

Then he realized that he wasn't alone.

Someone was in the room with him. Someone with no scent. No heartbeat. Fleshless. Bloodless.

Demonic? Possibly. It wouldn't be the first time he'd faced one of the Lords of Hell.

Forcing a sluggish arm to move, Henry reached over and switched on a lamp.

Sensitive eyes half closed—even forty-watt bulbs threw enough light to temporarily blind—he caught one quick glimpse of a young man standing at the foot of his bed before the faint, translucent image disappeared.

“A ghost?” Tony propped one leg on the wide arm of the green leather couch and shook his head.

“You're kidding, right?”

“Wrong.”

“Cool. I wonder what he wants. They always want something,” he added in answer to the question implicit in Henry's lifted red-gold brow. “Everyone knows that.”

“Do they?”

“Come on, Henry. Don't tell me in four-hundred-and-fifty-five odd years you've never seen a ghost?”

One hand flat against the cool glass of the window, the other hooked in the pocket of his jeans, Henry Fitzroy, bastard son of Henry VIII, once Duke of Richmond and Somerset, remembered a night in the late 1800s when he'd watched the specter of a terrified young queen run screaming down the hall to beg her king once more for a mercy she'd never receive. Over two hundred years before, Katherine Howard had attended his wedding to her cousin Mary. He hadn't gone to hers—her marriage to his father had occurred four years after his supposed death. Made a queen in July, 1540, she'd been beheaded in February, 1542, nineteen months later.

She'd been young and foolish and very likely guilty of the adultery she'd been charged with, but she hadn't deserved to have her spirit trapped, replaying over and over the soul-destroying moment when she'd realized she was going to die.

“Henry?”

“Whatever he wants,” Henry said without turning, “I doubt that I'll be able to give it to him. I can't change the past.”

Tony shivered. The centuries had gathered about the other man in a nearly visible cloud, wrapping him in a shroud of time and memory. “Henry, you're freaking me out.”

“Am I? Sorry.” Shaking off his melancholy, the ex-prince turned and managed a wry smile. “You seem somewhat nonchalant about being haunted.”

Glad to have him back, Tony shrugged, a trace of the street kid he'd been lingering in the jerky movement. “He's haunting you, not me. And besides, between living with you for the last two years and dealing with the weirdos at the store, I've learned to take the unexpected in stride.”

“Have you?” Not at all pleased with being compared to the weirdos at the video store where Tony worked, Henry's smile broadened, showing teeth. When he heard the younger man's heartbeat quicken, he crossed the room and wrapped an ivory hand around a slender shoulder. “So I've lost the

ability to surprise you?"

"I didn't say that." Tony's breathing grew ragged as a cool thumb traced the line of his jaw.

"Perhaps not exactly that."

"Uh, Henry . . ."

"What?"

He shook his head. It was enough to know Henry would stop if he wanted him to. More than enough considering he *didn't* want him to. "Never mind. Not important."

A short while later, teeth met through a fold of skin, the sharp points pierced a vein and, for a time, the dead were washed away with the blood of the living.

The warm evening air lapping against her face, Corporal Phyllis Roberts cruised along Commissioner Street humming the latest Celine Dion hit and tapping her fingers against the top of the steering wheel. Although the new Ports Canada Police cars had airconditioning, she never used it as she disliked the enclosed, spaceship feeling of driving with the windows rolled up.

Three hours into her shift, she was in a good mood. So far, nothing had gone wrong.

Three hours and fifteen minutes into her shift, Corporal Roberts stopped humming.

Turning into Vanterm, as of this moment her least favorite of the harbor's twenty-seven cargo and cruise ship terminals, Corporal Roberts squinted to make out the tiny figures of three men dwarfed by the bulk of a Singapore-registered container ship. The pole lights that turned the long wooden pier into a patchwork of stacked containers and hard-edged shadows washed away features so thoroughly she was almost on top of them before she recognized one of the men.

Leaving her cap in the car, she picked up her long, rubber-handled flashlight, touched her nightstick, more out of habit than any thought she might have to use it, and walked toward them. "Yo night-loading, Ted?"

Ted Polich, the shortest of the three longshoremen, jerked a balding head upward at the gantry crane that loomed over the dock like a mechanical bird of prey. "Controls have stiffened up and the son of a bitch is jerking left. We're trying to get it fixed tonight, so it doesn't slow loading tomorrow."

"God forbid," the corporal muttered. A huge increase in Pacific Rim trade had the port scrambling to keep up. "Where is it?"

"Up by the bow. It's caught in one of them eddies between the dock and the ship." Falling into step beside her, Polich shoved his hands in the pockets of grimy overalls. "We figured they'd send the city police."

"Sorry. You're stuck with me until we know for sure you saw what you said you did."

"You think we made it up?" asked one of the other men indignantly, leaning around his companion to glare at the cop.

Corporal Roberts shook her head and sighed. "I couldn't possibly be that lucky."

She wasn't.

Bobbing up and down in the narrow triangle between the bow and the dock was the body of a naked man, his back a pale, flesh-colored island, the strands of his hair sweeping against it like dark seaweed.

"Shit."

Polich nodded. "That's what I said. You figure he's a jumper?"

"I doubt it." While they did occasionally get jumpers off the Lions Gate Bridge, they hadn't had one yet who'd stopped to take his clothes off. Pointing her flashlight beam at the water, she slowly swept the circle of illumination over the corpse. Bruises, large and small, made a mottled pattern of purple against the pale skin. Not very old—*and not going to get any older*, she told herself grimly—he hadn't been in the water for long.

“Funny what makes some of ’em float and some of ’em sink,” Polich mused quietly beside her. “This guy’s skin and bones, should’a gone right to the . . . God damn it! Would you look at that!”

The other two longshoremen crowded in to see.

Flung forward, Corporal Roberts tottered on the edge of the pier, saved at the last minute from a potentially dangerous swim by a muscular arm thrust in front of her like a filthy, cloth-covered, safety rail. Breathing heavily, she thanked Polich and snarled a warning at the other two.

As they backed up, too intent on the body in the water to be properly penitent, one of them muttered, “What the hell could’ve happened to his hands?”

Sunset the next night occurred behind cloud cover so heavy only the fading light gave evidence that the sun had set at all. At 7:23, Tony turned off his watch alarm and muted the inane conversation filling in a rain delay for a Seattle Mariners’ home game. Who wanted to hear about a shortage of organ donors when they were waiting to watch baseball? He never *dreamed* he’d miss Fergie Oliver. Leaning back in his chair, he glanced down the hall, listening for the first sounds of Henry’s return and straining to hear the rattle of ghostly chains.

As the sun released its hold and his senses slowly began to function, Henry sifted through and ignored a hundred familiar sensations. An impossible breeze stroked icy fingers across his cheek. He willed his arm to move and switched on the lamp.

The ghost stood where it had the day before—a nondescript young man, needing a haircut and shave, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. Its edges were indistinct and although Henry could see writing on the shirt, he couldn’t make it out—whether because the writing hadn’t fully materialized or because the items on the dresser behind the ghost’s semitranslucent torso distracted him, he wasn’t sure. As far as Henry could remember, he’d never seen the young man alive.

He half expected the specter to vanish when he sat up, but it remained at the foot of his bed. *It’s waiting for something*. If a noncorporeal being could be said to have posture, the ghost’s stance screamed anticipation.

“All right.” He sighed and leaned back against the headboard. “What do you want?”

Slowly, the ghost lifted its arms and vanished.

Henry stared a moment longer at the place where it had been and wondered what could have possibly happened to its hands.

“It had no hands at all?” When Henry nodded, Tony chewed his lower lip in thought. “Were they, like, cut off or ripped off or chewed off or what?” he asked after a moment.

“They just weren’t there.” Henry took a bottle of water out of the fridge, opened it, and drained it. The growing popularity of bottled water had been a godsend; while blood provided total nourishment, all living things required water, and the purifying chemicals added by most cities made him ill. Bacteria, his system ignored. Chlorine, it rebelled against. Tossing the empty plastic bottle in the recycling bin, he leaned on the counter and stared down at his own hands. “They just weren’t there,” he repeated.

“Then I bet that’s what he wants—vengeance. They always want vengeance.”

Raising an eyebrow at Tony’s certainty, Henry asked just where he’d acquired his knowledge of what ghosts always wanted.

“You know, movies and stuff. He wants you to help him take revenge against the guy who took his hands.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

“Jeez, Henry, I don’t know. You worked with Vicki; didn’t she teach you nothing?”

“Anything.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Okay, anything.”

Vicki Nelson, private investigator, ex-police detective, ex-lover, vampire—Henry had worked with her for one short year before fate had brought them as close together as was possible with his kind and then had driven them apart. He’d been forced to change her to save her life and forced, by the change to give her up. Highly territorial, vampires hunted alone. She’d returned to Toronto and her mortal lover. He’d made a new life for himself on the West Coast.

Had she taught him anything?

Yes.

Did any of it have anything to do with handless ghosts?

No.

When he repeated his thoughts aloud for Tony’s benefit, he added, “One thing she did teach me is that I’m not a detective. I’m a writer, and, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go write.” Not entirely certain why memories of Vicki Nelson always made him so defensive, he headed for his computer, waving at the television on his way through the living room. “Your rain delay seems to be over.”

Half an hour later, having realized that the expected staccato clicking of keys hadn’t yet begun, Tony pushed open the door to Henry’s office. Standing on the threshold, he noted that nothing showed on the monitor but a chapter heading and a lot of blank screen.

“This spook really has you spooked, doesn’t it?”

“Why do you say that?” Henry asked without turning.

“You’re just sitting there, staring at your hands.”

“Maybe I was deep in thought.”

“Henry, you write bodice rippers. There’s a limit to how much deep thought is allowed.”

Seventeen years a royal duke, over four hundred and fifty years a vampire, it had taken Henry a while to recognize when he was being teased. Once or twice, Tony had come close to not surviving the adjustment. Lifting his gaze from his hands, he sighed. “All I can think of is, why me.” He laughed, but the sound held no humor. “Which seems a little self-centered since I’m merely being haunted and was not the one killed and mutilated.” Pushing his ergonomic chair away from the desk, he spun it around and stood. “I need to get out. Be distracted.”

“Great.” Tony grinned. “Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is playing at midnight at the Caprice.”

“Why not.” Enjoying Tony’s poleaxed expression, Henry turned the young man about and pushed him gently out of the doorway. “I hear Gary Oldman is terrific.”

“*You* hear?” Tony sputtered as Henry’s inarguable touch moved him down the hall. “You heard it from me! And when I told you, you told me that you never go to vampire movies—*that’s* why not.”

“I changed my mind.” Unable to resist, he added, “Maybe we can get a bite while we’re downtown.”

The elevators in the Pacific Place towers were as fast and as quiet as money could make them. With his fingertips resting lightly on the brushed steel doors, Henry cocked his head and smiled. “It sounds like Lisa’s shredding the character of another cabbie.”

Tony winced. “Man, I’m glad she likes *us*.”

As the chime announced the arrival of the elevator, the two men stepped away from the doors.

“Hello, boys.” One gloved hand clutching the arm of her paid companion, Lisa Evans grinned a very expensive and perfect grin as she shuffled into the corridor. The gleaming white teeth between glistening red lips added a ghastly emphasis to the skull-like effect created when age finally triumphed over years of cosmetic surgery. “Heading out for a late night on the town?”

“Just a midnight movie,” Henry told her as Tony stopped the doors from closing. He scooped up his free hand and raised it to his lips. “And you, I expect, have been out breaking hearts?”

“At my age? Don’t be ridiculous.” She pulled her hand free and smacked him lightly on the cheek, then turned on her companion. “And what are you smiling about, Munro?”

Not the least bit chastised, Mrs. Munro continued to smile down at her elderly employer. “I was just thinking about Mr. Swanson.”

“Swanson’s interested in my money, not these old bones.” But she preened a little and patted the head of the mink stole she wore over a raw silk suit. Once the mistress of a Vancouver lumber baron, she’d made a number of shrewd investments and parlayed a comfortable nest egg into a tidy fortune. “And besides, I’m not interested in him. All the good men are dead.” Sweeping a twinkling gaze over Henry and Tony, she added, “Or gay.”

“Miss Evans!”

“Chill out, Munro. I’m not telling them anything they don’t know.” Companion chastised, she turned her attention back to the two men. “We’ve just come from one of those tedious fund-raising things they expect you to attend when you have money. Organs, I think it was tonight.”

“Organs?” Henry repeated with a smile, fully aware that Lisa Evans enjoyed those tedious fund-raising things where her checkbook ensured she’d be stroked and flattered. He also knew that if she was vague, it was deliberate—no one made the kind of money she had without knowing exactly where every dollar ended up. “Musical or medical?”

“Medical.” Heavily shadowed eyes narrowed into a look that had been known to send a variety of CEOs running for cover. “Have you signed an organ donor card?”

“I’m afraid they wouldn’t want my organs.”

The look softened slightly as she leaped to the conclusion he’d intended. “Oh. I’m sorry. Still, when there’s life, there’s hope, and medical science is doing wonders these days.” She grinned. “I mean, it’s a wonder I’m still alive.” Pulling her companion down the hall, rather in the manner of a pilot boat guiding a tanker into harbor, she threw a cheery, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” back over her shoulder.

“Well, that leaves us a lot of leeway,” Henry murmured as the elevator door closed on Mrs. Munro’s continuing shocked protests.

Tony sagged against the back wall, hands shoved in his pockets. “Until I met Miss Evans, I always thought old ladies were kind of vague and smelly. Maybe you should send your ghost over to her.”

“Why?”

“If all the good men are dead . . .”

“Or gay,” Henry reminded him. “Suppose he turned out to be both? I’d hate to get on Lisa’s bad side.”

The thought of Lisa Evans’ bad side brought an exaggerated shudder. “Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask you; how come you’re so friendly with everybody in the building? You’re always talking to people. I’d have thought it would be safer to be a little more . . .”

“Reclusive?”

“Big word. I was going to say private, but I guess that’ll do.”

“People are afraid of what they don’t know.” Exiting into the underground garage, they walked in step to Henry’s BMW. “If people think they know me, they aren’t afraid of me. If a rumor begins that I am not what I seem, they’ll match it against what they think they know and discount it. If they have nothing to match it against, then they’re more likely to believe it.”

“So you make friends with people as a kind of camouflage?”

Frowning slightly, Henry watched Tony circle around to the passenger door. “Not always.”

“But sometimes?”

“Yes.”

With the car between them, Tony lifted his head and locked his eyes on Henry's face. "And what about me?"

"You?"

"What am I? Am I camouflage?"

"Tony . . ." Then he saw the expression in Tony's eyes and realized that it hadn't been a facetious question. "Tony, I trust you with everything I am. There're only two other people in the world I can say that about, and one of them doesn't exactly count."

"Because Vicki's become a vampire?"

"Because Michael Celluci would never admit to knowing a . . . romance writer."

Tony laughed, as he was meant to, but Henry heard the artificial resonance. For the rest of the night he worked hard at erasing it.

She'd seen the article too late to do anything about it that night, and the wait had not improved her temper.

"Is Richard Sullivan on duty?"

Startled, the edge on the words having cut her memory to shreds, the nurse checked the duty sheet. "Yes, Doctor. He . . ."

"I want to see him in my office. Immediately."

"Yes, Doctor." No point in protesting that he was cleaning up an unfortunate bedpan accident. Immediately meant immediately and no later. As she paged him, the nurse hoped that whatever Sullivan had done, it wasn't enough to get him fired. Orderlies willing to do the shit work without bitching and complaining were few and far between. Besides, it was difficult not to like the big man; those puppy dog eyes were hard to resist.

"What do you know about this?"

Sullivan looked down at the article and then up at the doctor. Denial died unspoken as she read his answer off his face.

"This *is* one of ours?"

He nodded.

"Then what part of my instructions did you not understand?"

"It's not that I . . ."

"Or do you not enjoy your job? Is it not everything I told you it would be?"

"Yes. I mean, I do. And it is, but . . ."

"You are *not* supposed to be showing initiative, Mr. Sullivan."

Their relative sizes made it ridiculous that he should cower before her temper, but he did anyway.

The ghost was wearing a Cult and Jackyl T-shirt, a local band that recorded in North Vancouver. Henry was a little surprised it wasn't a Grateful Dead T-shirt. He'd often suspected the universe had really macabre, and pretty basic, sense of humor. Its arms still ended just above the wrist. Again, it seemed to be waiting.

Tony believed it wanted vengeance.

I suppose that's as good a theory as any, Henry reflected. He sighed. "Do you want revenge on the person who took your hands?"

Impatience adding a first hint of personality to translucent features, the ghost slowly faded away.

Henry sighed again. "I take it that's a qualified yes."

The apartment was empty when he emerged from his room. After a moment, he remembered it was Saturday and Tony would be working late.

“Which is probably a good thing,” he announced to the lights of the city. He wondered if the ghost expected him to begin by finding the hands, and if he should be looking for the remains of flesh and bone or an ethereal pair quite possibly haunting someone else.

When Tony returned home after midnight, he was in his office with the door closed, deep in the complicated court politics of 1813 and more than a little concerned with his heroine’s refusal to follow the plot as outlined. Dawn nearly caught him still trying to decide whether Wellington would promote her betrothed to full colonel and he raced for the sanctuary of his bed having forgotten his spectral visitor in the night’s work.

“This is becoming irritating; do you at least know who has your hands?”

The ghost threw back its head and screamed. No sound emerged from the gaping black hole of a mouth, but Henry felt the hair lift off the back of his neck and a cold dread wrap around his heart. While the scream endured, he thought he sensed a multitude of spirits within the scream; all shrieking in unison, all lamenting the injustice of their deaths. His lips drew off his teeth in an involuntary snarl.

“Henry? Henry! Are you okay?”

The ghost’s face, distended by the continuing scream, faded last.

“Henry!”

It took him a moment to realize that the pounding wasn’t his heart—it was Tony, banging frantically on the bedroom door. He shook himself free of the lingering uneasiness and padded across the room, the carpet cold and damp against his bare feet. Releasing the bolts, he called, “I’m all right!”

When he opened the door, Tony nearly fell into his arms.

Eyes wide, panting as though he’d just run a race, Tony pulled back far enough to see for himself that Henry was unharmed. “I heard . . . no, I felt . . . it was . . .” His fingers tightened around Henry’s bare shoulders. “What happened? Was it the ghost?”

“I’m only guessing, but I think I asked it a question with a negative answer.”

“Negative?” Tony’s voice rose to an incredulous squeak and he let his arms drop to his side. “I’ll say it was *negative*. It was bottom of the pit, soul-sucking, annihilation!”

“It wasn’t that bad . . .”

“Maybe not for you!”

Concerned, Henry studied Tony’s face. “Are *you* all right?”

“I guess.” He drew in a deep breath, released it slowly, and nodded. “Yeah. I’m okay. But I’m gonna stay right here and watch you dress.” Propped up on one shoulder, he sagged against the doorframe, too frightened to be tough, or independent, or even interested in Henry’s nakedness. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“Do you want to know what happened?” From Tony’s expression, it was clear that he hadn’t needed to ask. While he pulled on his clothes, Henry described what had occurred when he’d tried to get more information from the ghost.

“So, you can only ask one question and if the answer’s yes, it disappears quietly, and if the answer’s no, it lets you know how disappointed it is with you.”

“Not only how disappointed *it* is,” Henry told him. “When it screamed, I sensed a multitude of the dead.”

“Yeah? How many dead in a multitude, Henry?”

“This is nothing to joke about.”

“Trust me, I’m not laughin’ inside.” Tony followed Henry into the living room, dropping gracelessly onto one end of the heavy leather sofa. “Man, game shows from beyond the grave. You mind if I turn on some lights? That thing’s still got me kind of spooked.” When Henry indicated he should go ahead, he stretched back, flicked on the track lighting, and centered himself in a circle of

illumination. "At least we know two things. It *does* want revenge, and it *doesn't* know where its hands are."

"What of the others?"

"Can we maybe deal with this one ghost at a time? I mean, why borrow trouble?"

Tucked into a pocket of shadow on the other side of the room, Henry sighed. "I'd still like to know why me?"

"Like attracts like."

Brows drawn in, Henry leaned forward, bringing his face into the light. "I beg your pardon."

"You're a vampire." Tony shrugged and stroked the tiny, nearly healed wound barely visible against the tanned skin of his left wrist. "Even if you're not a supernatural creature, even if all you are is biologically different . . ."

"All I am?"

"Henry!"

Henry graciously indicated he should continue although his lip remained curled.

"Look, there's a whole shitload of myth about you. Okay, not you specifically, but about your kind. It's all around you . . ." He spread his arms. ". . . like a kind of metaphysical fog. I bet that's what the ghost is attracted to. I bet that's what pulls him to you."

"Metaphysical fog," Henry repeated. Shaking his head, he leaned back in his chair. "Did you talk like that in Toronto?"

"You needn't get so damned superior!" His relaxed posture gone, Tony jabbed a finger in Henry's direction. "It's a perfectly valid theory. Or have you got a better one?"

Surprised by the young man's vehemence, Henry admitted he didn't, but before Tony could continue, he cut him off with an uplifted hand. "Something's happening in the hall."

Tony's scowl deepened. "I don't hear any . . . shit." There was no point in continuing. Henry was already at the door.

He'd heard the ambulance attendants. As he stepped out into the hall, they were rolling the stretcher out of apartment 1404. The tiny figure under the straps lay perfectly still, one thin hand dangling limply off the side. The attendants were performing CPR even as they rushed toward the elevator, but Henry knew Lisa Evans was irretrievably dead.

He barely managed to keep himself from leaping back and snarling as Mrs. Munro clutched at his arm.

A few moments later, after bundling the sobbing companion into his car, he was speeding toward St. Paul's Hospital after the ambulance while Tony passed Mrs. Munro tissue after tissue from the box in the glove compartment.

The emergency room doctors took very little time before they agreed with Henry's diagnosis. They, too, had seen death too often to mistake it.

"She was very old," Dr. Zvane told them softly.

"There's older!" Mrs. Munro protested. Tony handed her another tissue.

"True." The doctor shrugged, and knuckled weary eyes. "All I can say is that it was her time. We did everything we could, but she'd gone on and had no intention of coming back."

Gripping Henry's hand hard enough to crack merely mortal joints, Mrs. Munro sniffed. "That's just like her. You could never get her to change her mind once she'd made it up."

She'd stopped crying by the time she got back into the car. Although Henry had offered to drive her wherever she wanted to go, she'd asked to be taken back to the condo. "I have to get my things. My daughter will pick me up there."

"We were watching *Jeopardy*," she continued, able to talk about what had happened now that it was officially over. "It was the championship round. Miss Evans had just shouted out, '*Who is Captain*

Kirk? when all of a sudden, she sort of whimpered and clapped her hands over her ears. She looked like she'd heard something horrible except I didn't hear anything at all. The next thing I knew, she was . . . gone."

Henry met Tony's eyes in the rearview mirror. It was obvious they were thinking the same thing.

"I don't think he's doing it deliberately."

"I don't care. He is responsible for that old lady's death, and I say he can go handless into hell."

Back in his circle of light, Tony shivered. Henry's voice had cut through the distance between living room and bedroom like the distance didn't exist, and every word had held an edge. When he appeared a moment later, Tony took in his change of clothes—his face and hair seemed luminescent above all that black—and asked, although he didn't really need to, "Where are you going?"

"Hunting."

It was almost impossible not to respond to the ghost's anticipation.

"You can stand there as long as you like," Henry growled, "but I am *not* going to help you."

The ghost threw back its head and screamed.

An unseen, unheard chorus of the dead screamed with it.

"I thought you weren't going to ask it any more questions!"

"I didn't." Henry stared down at the city, listening for the sound of a siren, his fingers splayed against the glass, the muscles rigid across his back. "I told it, it could expect no help."

"It didn't seem to like that."

"No. It didn't."

They stood together in silence, waiting for the sounds of another death.

Finally Tony sighed and threw himself down on the sofa. "Looks like we got lucky; nobody old enough, close enough. Tomorrow night, why don't you say nothing at all."

It waited. And it waited. When Henry tried to leave the room, it screamed.

They watched the ambulance arrive. They learned that the Franklins' baby died in its sleep.

"Babies. Man . . ." Two years ago, Tony had watched an ancient Egyptian wizard devour the life force of a baby. The parents walked on, completely unaware that their child was dead. He still had nightmares about it. "This is blackmail."

"Yes. And it has made me angry." The plastic cracked in his grip as he picked up the phone.

Swallowing nervously—Henry's anger could be as terrifying as silent ghostly screams—Tony managed a partial smile and asked, "Calling the Ghostbusters?"

"Not quite. I've decided this is not a job for a romance writer."

"Well, I guess not, but . . ." He let his next question trail off when Henry activated the external speaker on the phone. After two rings, an answering machine clicked on.

"Victory Nelson, Private Investigations. There's no one here to take your call right now. Please leave a message after the tone. . . ."

Two

DETECTIVE-Sergeant Michael Celluci closed the heavy metal door quietly behind him and stepped cautiously into the shadowed apartment. A dim fan of light that spilled out from the office under the loft was swallowed up by the sixteen-foot ceiling in the main room. The building had been a glass factory before a recession had emptied it and urban renewal had filled it again with barely serviceable living space for the fashionable fringe of Toronto. The majority of the tenants dressed exclusively in black and most were involved in some way with “the arts”—although some of those ways were pretty peripheral in Michael Celluci’s not at all humble opinion.

His soft-soled shoes making no sound on the rug that defined a right-of-way along one wall, he moved toward the light.

“So what about the guy you can see? What’s he, the union representative?” The silence defined the response. “I’m sorry. I *am* taking this seriously. No, I am. Ask it innocuous questions until I get there.” The old wooden office chair creaked alarmingly as it was tipped back on two legs. “Ask it things you *know* it’ll have to answer yes to.”

Just under the edge of the loft, an arm’s length from the chair, Celluci stretched out a hand to grab a sweatshirt-clad shoulder. Just before his fingers closed on fabric, they were captured in an unbreakable grip.

The woman holding him flashed him a disdainful *nice try* and kept talking into the phone. “Look, how hard can it be? Did you used to be a man? Are you dead now? Were you once alive?”

Were you alive? Celluci mouthed as she pulled him around the edge of her chair and pushed him down onto a corner of the cluttered desk.

Brows lowered, she acknowledged he’d heard correctly with a single nod, then tried to reassure her caller. “It doesn’t matter that they’re stupid questions as long as it answers yes. I’ll be there as soon as I can. I’ll . . .” Sighing, she settled back with an expression Celluci recognized—the first time he’d seen it, they’d both been in uniform, and it had been aimed at him. There could be only one explanation for it now; the person on the other end of the line was actually daring to give Vicki Nelson advice.

She’d never taken advice well. Not when she’d been in uniform and considered herself God’s gift to the Metropolitan Toronto Police. Not when she’d made detective. Not when retinitis pigmentosa had forced her to quit a job she’d both loved and excelled at. Not during the time she’d been a private investigator. And not since the change.

If I didn’t know, he thought, watching her features shift from impatience to irritation, *I’d never realize what she was*.

She looked much the same, only a little thinner and a lot paler. She acted much the same, having always been overbearing, arrogant, and opinionated.

All right, so she didn’t used to drink blood. . . .

“That’s enough!” Irritation had become annoyance and, from her tone, she’d cut off a continuing monologue. “I’ll be there as soon as I can, and if you’re not home when I arrive, I’m heading straight back to Toronto.” Hanging up as the last “oh” left her mouth, she turned her attention to Celluci and said, “Henry has a ghost and would like me to get rid of it for him.”

Cold fingers touched the back of Celluci’s neck. “Henry Fitzroy?”

“Himself.”

“Isn’t he still in Vancouver?”

Silver-gray eyes narrowed as she gazed up at him. “He is.”

“And you’ve just agreed to travel clear across the country to take care of his . . .” In spite of everything they’d been through—in spite of demons, werewolves, mummies, and the reanimation of the dead, in spite of vampires—his lip curled. “. . . ghost?”

“I have,”

“And since you’ve presented it to me as a *fait accompli*, can I assume anything I have to say becomes irrelevant?”

Her brows drew in slightly. “This ghost is scaring people to death, Mike, and it’s going to keep doing it until someone finds out why and stops it. Henry isn’t trained for that kind of an investigation.” When he opened his mouth, she lifted a hand in warning. “And don’t you dare say I’m not either. I’ll be stopping a killer. It doesn’t matter that he’s dead.”

No. It wouldn’t. But the ghost had little or nothing to do with his reaction. He leaped to his feet and pushed past her, out of the office and into the main room where he’d have floor enough to pace. “Do you know how far it is to Vancouver?”

“About 4,500 kilometers.”

He stomped to the door and back again. “Do you realize how short the night is at this time of the year?”

“Less than nine hours.” Her voice added a clear indication that she wasn’t pleased about it either.

“And do you remember what happens when you’re caught out in the sun?”

“I barbecue.”

Hands spread, he rocked to a stop in front of her. “So you’re going to go 4,500 kilometers, in less than nine-hour shifts, with no sanctuary from the sun? Do you have any idea how insanely dangerous that is?”

“I’ve been thinking about buying a used van and making a few minor modifications.”

“A few minor modifications,” he repeated incredulously, trying to bury fear with anger. “You’ll be a sitting duck all day, no matter where you park—a charcoal briquette just waiting to happen!”

“So come with me.”

“Come with you? As a favor to Henry-fucking-Fitzroy?”

She got slowly to her feet and glared up at him through narrowed eyes. “Is that what this is really about? Henry?”

“No!” And it wasn’t; not entirely. “This is about you putting yourself in unnecessary danger. Don’t they have PI’s in British Columbia?”

“Not ones who can deal with something like this and no one Henry trusts.” She smiled, a little self mockingly, then spread one hand against his chest and added, her words slowed to the rhythm of his heartbeat, “I don’t want to become a charcoal briquette. I could use your help, Mike.”

His mouth snapped shut around the remainder of the diatribe. The old Vicki Nelson had never been able to ask for help. When Henry Fitzroy had given her his blood, he’d changed her in more than just the obvious ways. Celluci hated the undead, romance-writing, royal bastard for that.

“Let me think about it,” he muttered. “I’m going to make coffee.”

Vicki listened to him stomp into the tiny kitchen and begin opening and closing cupboard doors with more force than was strictly necessary. She drew in a deep breath, savoring the scent of him. He’d always smelled terrific; a kind of heated, male smell that used to make her incredibly horny whenever she got a whiff of it. Okay, it still made her horny, she corrected with a grin. But now it also made her hungry.

“Don’t you ever throw your garbage out,” he snarled.

“Why should I? I don’t create any of it.”

He hadn’t needed to raise his voice. She could’ve heard him if he’d whispered. She could hear his blood pulse through his veins. Sometimes she thought she could hear his thoughts. Although he might be honestly concerned about the dangers of travel, when it came right down to it, he didn’t want to go to Vancouver with her because he didn’t want to do Henry Fitzroy any favors. Neither did he want her to go to Vancouver, and thus to Henry Fitzroy, without him.

Finishing off the bit of bookkeeping she’d been doing when Henry’d called, Vicki saved the file and waited for Mike to make up his mind, wondering if he realized she had no intention of going without him.

That Henry was being haunted by a ghost who played twenty questions with deadly results didn’t surprise her. Nothing much surprised her anymore. *There are more things in heaven and earth . . .* She’d had it printed on her business cards. Mr. Shakespeare had no idea.

That Henry had called, wanting to hire her to solve his little mystery, *had* surprised her. He’d been so definite when they’d parted that they’d never see each other again, that they couldn’t see each other again.

As though he’d been reading *her* thoughts, Celluci chose that moment to come back into the office and growl, “I thought vampires were unable to share a territory.”

Vicki’s chin rose. “I refuse to be controlled by my nature.”

Celluci snorted. “Yeah. Right.” He took a swallow of steaming coffee. “Tell that to the vampire who used to live here.”

“I was willing to negotiate,” Vicki protested, but she felt her lip curling up off her teeth. The *other* vampire had taunted her with the death of a friend and claimed downtown Toronto. When Vicki had finally killed her, she’d felt no regret, no guilt, and no need to tell Detective-Sergeant Michael Celluci the full details of what had happened. Not only because of what he was—not only because he was human—but because of who he was. He wouldn’t have understood, and she didn’t think she could stand it if he looked at her the way he’d sometimes looked at Henry.

So she’d told him only that she’d won.

Now she changed her incipient snarl into something closer to a smile. “Henry and I will manage to get along.”

Celluci hid his own smile behind the coffee mug. He recognized the tone and wondered if Henry had any idea of how little choice he was about to have in the matter. He didn’t want Vicki going to Vancouver, but since she’d already made up her mind, he couldn’t stop her—nor was he suicidal enough to try. Since she was going, regardless, he didn’t want her going alone. Besides, he’d enjoy watching his bloodsucking, royal bastardness get run over by Vicki’s absolute refusal to do what was expected of her.

“All right. You win. I’m going with you.”

“. . . things are slow right now, and I’ve got the time.”

Inspector Cantree snorted. “You’ve always got the time, Detective. I’m just amazed you actually want to use some of it.”

Celluci shrugged. “Something came up with a friend of Vicki’s out west.”

“A friend of Vicki’s. Ah.” The inspector stared into the oily scum on top of his coffee, the heavy stoneware mug looking almost delicate in his huge hand. “And how is ‘Victory’ Nelson these days? I hear she’s been dealing with some strange cases since she got back in town.”

Celluci shrugged again. “Someone has to. At least if they’re calling her, they’re not calling us.”

“True.” Cantree’s eyes narrowed, and the look he shot at the other man was frankly speculative. “She never struck me as the type to get involved in this paranormal, occult bullshit.”

Celluci only just stopped himself from shrugging a third time. “Most of her work’s the same old boring crap. Cheating spouses. Insurance fraud.”

“Most,” Cantree repeated. It wasn’t quite a question, so Celluci didn’t answer it.

Inspector Cantree had narrowly escaped becoming the enchanted acolyte of an ancient Egyptian god. The others who’d been caught up in the spell had created their own explanations, but he’d insisted on hearing the truth. As he’d never mentioned it again, Celluci remained unsure of how much he’d believed.

The memory hung in the air between them for a moment, then Cantree brushed it aside, the gesture stating as clearly as if he’d said it aloud: *Forty-seven homicides so far this year; I’ve enough to deal with.* “Take your vacation, Detective, but I want your butt back here in two weeks ready to work.”

“Vicki, we will never make it to Vancouver in *that*.”

“I know it doesn’t look like much . . .” Hands on her hips, Vicki swept her gaze over the grimy blue van and decided not to mention that it’d probably look worse in daylight. It looked bad enough under the security light in Celluci’s driveway. “. . . but it’s mechanically sound.”

“Since when do you know anything about *mechanically sound*?”

“I don’t.” She turned and grinned at him, meeting his eyes and allowing power to rise momentarily in hers. “But nobody lies to me anymore.”

Because it had been used for deliveries, the van box had no windows to cover. Vicki’d had a partition with wide rubber gaskets installed behind the seats and another just inside the rear doors.

“You got it done fast enough, didn’t you?” Celluci brushed at a dusting of sawdust at the base of the front barrier and frowned at the inner bolts that ensured there’d be no unwelcome visitors. “What happens if there’s an accident and I have to get you out?”

“Wait until sunset and I’ll get myself out.”

“There’s no ventilation, and it’s likely to get hotter than hell in there,”

She shrugged. “I doubt I’ll notice.”

“You doubt?” His voice started to rise, and he forced it back down, the dark windows in the surrounding houses reminding him that the neighbors were still asleep and very likely wanted to remain that way. “You’re not sure?”

“I’m sure that I won’t feel it. Other than that . . .” There were a number of things about being a vampire she was having to discover as the situation came up. Henry had taught her how to feed without causing harm, how to gently change the memories of those who provided nourishment, and how to blend with the mortals who walked the day, but he’d never taught her that swimming was out of the question because increased bone density caused her to sink like a rock—scaring the shit out of the lifeguard at the “Y.” Nor had he mentioned what traveling all day in the back of an enclosed van might do. “The SPCV suggests leaving a rear window rolled down a bit and parking out of the sun.”

Celluci stared at her in confusion. “The what?”

“The society for the prevention of cruelty to vampires. It was a joke.” She patted his arm. “Never mind. What do you think of the bed?”

He peered past her shoulder. The bed had padded sides ten inches high. “It looks like a coffin without a lid. I’m not using it.”

“Suit yourself, but remember who’s driving nights while you’re sleeping.” She mimed steering around a corner and did a fairly good impersonation of tires squealing against the road.

As Vicki’s driving style hovered between kamikaze and Montreal cabbie, Celluci shuddered and checked his watch. Unfortunately, if they planned on leaving before daybreak, they didn’t have time to fight about either the bed or Vicki’s driving—and if he couldn’t do anything about the latter, he certainly wasn’t going to insist on removing the padding from the former. “Let’s get going, then. It’s

four-twelve and sunrise is in less than forty-five minutes.” When Vicki lifted both brows, he pulled a battered paperback out of his back pocket. “*Farmer’s Almanac*. It’s got sunrise and sunset for the whole year. I decided it might be best to be prepared.”

“For what?” Vicki drew herself up to her full five-feet ten, her expression dangerous and purely human. This argument, or variations on the theme, long predated the change. “What’s the matter, Mike? You still think I can’t take care of myself?”

“Not between sunrise and sunset,” he reminded her mildly, refusing to be drawn.

Vicki deflated. Unfortunately, he was completely and absolutely and inarguably correct. She hated that—not so much that he was right, but that it left her no room for argument.

And he knew it. Eyes crinkling at the corners, he shoved the book back into his pocket.

Stepping forward, she brushed the overlong curl of dark brown hair back off his forehead and murmured, “Come evening, however, no one messes with me.”

Lying in the coffinlike bed, vibrating along with the van’s six-cylinder, no-longer-entirely-to-company-specs engine, enclosed in a warm darkness so deep it draped over her like black velvet, Vicki could feel the sun. The flesh between her shoulders crawled. Two years a vampire and she still hadn’t gotten used to the approach of the day.

“It’s like that final instant, just before someone hits you from behind, when you know it’s going to happen and you can’t do a damned thing about it. Only it lasts longer. . . .”

Celluci hadn’t been impressed by the analogy, and she supposed she couldn’t blame him—it didn’t impress her much either. While he’d pulled the van up under the security light and methodically checked for pinholes that might let in the sun, she’d almost gone crazy with the need to get under cover. He hadn’t listened when she’d told him she’d already checked, but then, he’d always believed she took foolish risks.

Risks, she took.

Foolish risks, never.

Okay, hardly ever.

Wondering why she was suddenly doing numbers from *HMS Pinafore*, she licked her lips and tasted the memory of Celluci’s mouth against hers. He’d wanted to wait for sunrise before he started driving but Vicki’d insisted he start right after she closed herself up in her moving sanctuary. She didn’t think she could cope with both of them waiting for . . .

. . . oblivion.

At that hour of the morning, traffic was heading into Toronto, not out of it and, for all its disreputable appearance, the van handled well. Fully aware he would not be able to explain the apparent corpse in the back should he be stopped by the OPP, Celluci drove a careful five kilometers over the limit and resigned himself to being passed by nearly every other car on the highway.

“Get your picture taken,” he muttered as an old and rusty K-car buzzed by him. Unfortunately, the new Ontario government had recently pulled the photo radar vans, insisting they’d shown no positive effects. Celluci had no idea where the idiots at Queen’s Park had gathered their information, but in his personal experience, the threat of the vans had kept paranoid drivers actually traveling at slightly less than the limit.

He stopped at Barrie for breakfast and a chance to stretch his legs. A tractor trailer accident held him for an hour just outside Waubaushene and by the time he stopped for lunch at the Centennial Diner in Bigwood, he’d heard Sonny and Cher sing “I Got You Babe” on three different oldies stations and was wondering why he was putting himself through rock-and-roll hell for Henry-fucking-Fitzroy

“I should’ve tried harder to talk her out of it.” He yanked a tasseled toothpick out of his club sandwich. So what if there were no PI’s on the West Coast Fitzroy could trust. “How’s he supposed to

make new friends if he never talks to strangers.”

“Is anything wrong?”

Celluci manufactured a smile and tossed it up to his teenage waitress. “No. Nothing’s wrong.” Watching her watch him on her way back to the kitchen, he sighed. *Great Not only does he expect Vicki to risk her life traveling across three quarters of the country, but now he’s got me talking to myself.*

On the flyspecked radio above the pie rack, Sonny Bono once again declared his love in the face of everything they said.

“WaWa?” Knuckles on her hips, Vicki rolled the kinks out of her shoulders. “Why WaWa?”

Celluci shrugged, eyes appreciatively following her movements. “Why not WaWa? I thought you might want to see the goose.”

“The goose?” Slowly, she turned and peered up at the nine-meter-high steel sculpture silhouetted against a gray sky streaked with orange. “Okay. I’ve seen it. I hope we’re not sharing the high point of your day.”

“Close,” he admitted. “How’re you feeling?”

“Like my body spent the day bouncing around inside a padded box. Other than that, fine.”

“Are you, uh . . .” He broke off in embarrassment as a car pulled into the small parking lot and a pair of children exploded out of the back and raced up the path toward the bathrooms.

“Hungry?” Stepping into the circle of his body heat, she grinned. “Mike, you can say *hungry* in front of kids—they’ll assume I’ll be having a Big Mac, not Ronald MacDonald.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Actually, it’s given me an appetite.”

He grabbed her upper arms, halting her advance. “Forget it, Vicki, I’m too old for a quickie in the back of a van.” But his protest had little force, and after the kids and the car disappeared, he allowed himself to be convinced.

It didn’t take much.

Twenty minutes later, as they climbed up into the front seats, Vicki reached out and caught a mosquito about to land on his back. “Forget it, sister,” she muttered, squashing the bug between thumb and forefinger. “He gave at the office.”

“We’re just past Portage la Prairie?” Celluci looked up from the map of Manitoba with a scowl. He hadn’t slept well, and the thermos of coffee Vicki’d handed him when he’d staggered out of the van could peel the residue off a garbage truck. He drank it anyway—after fifteen years drinking police coffee, he could drink anything—but he wasn’t happy. The last thing he needed to be told was that they’d gone considerably past the point where he’d expected to take over. “You must’ve been doing between a hundred and twenty-five and a hundred and thirty kilometers an hour!”

“What’s your point?”

“Let’s start with the speed limit being a hundred kilometers an hour and take it from there. It’s not just a good idea,” he added sarcastically, fighting to refold the map. “It’s the law.”

Vicki clamped her teeth down on a complaint that a hundred K to someone with her reaction time was ridiculously slow, and merely shrugged. Her opinions didn’t make the speed limit any less the law. If he’d suggested she’d been driving unsafely, then she could’ve given him an argument.

Leaning back against the van, she stared out at the farmland surrounding the gas station parking lot. With the station closed and the only illumination coming from the stars and Celluci’s flashlight, it seemed as though they were the last people alive in the world. She hated that feeling and she’d felt it for most of the night as she’d sped away from Lake Superior toward Kenora and the Ontario/Manitob

border. At 3 A.M. even Winnipeg was a little short of people up and about—except for a sleepy clerk at the 24-hour gas station/donut shop where she'd filled the van and two transients spotted sleeping in the shelter of an overpass. She'd cut through the middle of Portage la Prairie rather than take the Trans-Canada Highway loop around, but it was still too early for anyone to be up and about.

Used to living, and hunting among three million people, at least one million of whom never seemed to sleep, the isolation made her feel vulnerable and exposed.

“Give me that.” She reached down and snatched the partially folded map out of Mike's hands. “All you have to do is follow the original creases. Why is that so difficult?”

Vulnerable, exposed, and in a really bad mood. Meeting Celluci's astonished glower with a half-apologetic wave of the map, she growled, “All this scenery is beginning to get to me.”

Recognizing that on a perfectly straight, completely flat stretch of road no one was going to drive one hundred kilometers an hour, the speed limit through Saskatchewan was one hundred and ten. Almost everyone did one twenty. Considering his cargo, Celluci compromised at one fifteen.

A lifetime's worth of wheat fields later, at 7:17 P.M. local time, he pulled into a truck stop just outside Bassano, Alberta, and turned off the engine wondering if there was a Sonny and Cher revival going on he hadn't heard about. If he had to listen to “I Got You, Babe” one more time, he was going to have to hurt someone. Parking the van so that Vicki could exit without being seen, he walked stiffly across the asphalt to the restaurant. Sunset would be at 8:30, so he had little better than an hour to eat.

Soup of the day was beef barley. He stared down into the bowl and remembered all the meals he and Vicki had eaten together, all the gallons of coffee, all the stale sandwiches grabbed on the run. All at once, the thought that they'd never again go out for dim sum, or chicken paprikas, or even order in a pizza while they watched *Hockey Night in Canada* left him feeling incredibly depressed.

“Is there something wrong with the soup?” A middle-aged woman in a spotless white apron peered down at him with some concern from behind the counter.

“The, uh, the soup's fine.”

“Glad to hear it. It don't come out of a can, you know. I make it myself.” When he couldn't find an immediate response, she shook her head and sighed. “Come on, buddy, cheer up. You look like you've lost your best friend.”

Celluci frowned. He hadn't exactly lost her. Vicki remained everything to him she ever had been, except a dinner companion and weighed against the rest that shouldn't mean much. But, right now, it did. *I thought I'd dealt with this. . . .*

He barely noticed when the waitress took the empty bowl away and replaced it with a platter of steak and home fries.

Vampire, Nightwalker, Nosferatu—Vicki was no longer human. Granted, she'd made a commitment to him in a way she'd never been able to before the change, but, given immortality, how important could the few years of his life be?

The rhubarb pie tasted like sawdust and he left half of it on the plate.

Shoulders hunched and hands shoved into his jacket pockets, he headed back across the parking lot toward the van. Vaguely aware he was wallowing in self-pity, he couldn't seem to stop.

When the van's engine roared into life, it took him completely by surprise. Standing three feet from the front bumper, Celluci stared through a fine film of bug bodies smeared over the windshield and into the smug face of a young man in his late teens or early twenties. He didn't realize what was happening until the young man backed the van away from him, cranked the steering wheel around, and laid rubber all the way out to the highway.

The van was being stolen.

Instinct sent him racing after it, but halfway across the parking lot, the fact he didn't have a chance

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