

Tooth and Nail – Prologue

I kind of find I like a life this lonely.
--Franz Ferdinand, "Come on Home"

-- 1953, Henderson County, North Carolina --

I was crossing the clearing two steps behind Clyde, ruining my shoes in the mud and wobbling a little, when he stopped and turned and held up one hand half-way to bring me to a halt. "I don't mean to be a drag, Withrow," he sighed, "But before I show you the site I need to know more about why you're here. This is supposed to be off limits. I shouldn't be bringing you here."

He had, though, because I'd made him. He didn't know that, but I'd made him do it just as surely as if I'd put a gun to his back. I'd looked into his eyes and told him to do it and he had as though it had been his own idea.

"Private interest," I said, spreading my hands a little. "Client confidentiality prevents me from saying a word until I'm on a stand and I doubt it will ever come to that."

"Client confidentiality doesn't mean dick unless you're working for someone's lawyer," Clyde growled. He wasn't angry with me but he was angry. What had happened here, happened in a dozen other cases, smelled the same to him: someone knew something that could crack the case and hired a fixer to make sure no one asked them the right wrong questions. He assumed I had a client who had the goods on – or was – the monster who'd done all this and that I was their agent on the ground.

"I am, but it's not like that." I gestured vaguely at my own coat. "Want to see the license again? Motivations don't enter into it, Clyde. You know I'd say more if I could but this is business." There was a slip of paper in the wallet in my coat but it was just blank paper, a prop. I'd hoodooed the license into his memories when I'd given him the idea to bring me here in the first place. I was no more a detective than I played first base for the Dodgers. I didn't even know what a PI's license looked like. I didn't need to. Clyde already knew it for me. "Still, business or not, I'm not protecting any criminals. The people I work for, I promise you, did not do this."

Clyde watched my face for a minute and then nodded. "Sorry. I believe you. It's just... well. Just don't tell anybody I did this, OK?"

"Cross my heart," I said with a faint smile. I flicked the dog-end of my cigarette off into the shadows that draped everything but the single, stretched circle made by Clyde's cheap flashlight. Flashlights back then were nothing compared to now, just a bulb in a silvered dome we

could point at things. Clyde couldn't see a damned thing by that light but I could see just fine. I'd aimed the cig for a puddle eight feet away and bulls-eyed it. I sniffed the air once as the breeze shifted slightly and something turned over in my guts. It was weak, mostly washed away by the two days of rain, but I could smell it: blood, buckets of it, along with other smells of flesh and entrails and rot and, very faintly, the smell of a predator, a beast of the shadows. The rain had come at just the wrong time; it had encouraged everything terrible that lives in a body waiting for it to die. "We're close now, aren't we?"

Clyde narrowed his eyes for a moment and then nodded his head jerkily to one side. "Ten yards that way. We can go look at it in the flashlight but I can't let you stomp around. There are going to be five eggheads out here with protractors and slide-rules and a few local coon hounds for the next week trying to count every footstep for half a mile."

"That's fine," I said, though it wasn't really.

We walked that direction and about five yards away Clyde pointed the flashlight at two matted spots on the ground. "The kid and the granny," he sighed. "Looks like there was a fight from all the knocked down weeds a little ways over there." He bobbed the flashlight off into the dark in such a way it might have indicated a spot twenty feet or two hundred from where we stood. "Don't know who got them but we've got stories about an outsider hanging around with them for a few days. Real reclusive guy, secretive. Supposedly he was a song chaser, some professor from up North, but what if he wasn't? Neighbors say the kid had been shut up in that house with him for at least two weeks. Lots of late night drives, lots of sleeping in all day."

I grunted and rubbed my chin; I was too busy flaring my nostrils and taking deep, quiet breaths to say much. I could still smell a predator, still faint, but it was a little stronger here and it was unquestionably real. None of my kind would have smelled that and failed to recognize it. To have something to say, though, after a few moments I turned back to Clyde and kept his topic going. "The granny?"

"Nobody saw her around the place." Clyde reached up to rub one eye with the palm of his free hand, then gummed a cigarette out of a pack in his jacket. His tie was out of place, his hair oil slipping, bags under his eyes. He hadn't slept much in the couple of days since the SBI had moved in on the case. The locals had messed it up beyond repair, Clyde had told me. The mud was mostly from kids coming out in the sedan to do slow doughnuts around the place and pretend they'd seen something grizzly or funny or new. "She lived out in the middle of nowhere, towards Pisgah Forest. No neighbors close enough to know anything useful. No power, no radio, just an old Victrola and some brittle records."

I clicked my cheeks against my teeth. "What's your gut tell you?"

Clyde thought for a long time, watching the tip of his cigarette burn. Without the flashlight I could have seen well enough by that tiny red glow to find the crushed plants where the bodies had lain for days; with the sliver of waning moon that was still rising I could have read a book. "I don't know," he finally said. "They say eventually you get a knack for that kind of thing but I

don't guess it's bitten me yet."

"You must think something..." I tried not to sound too eager.

"Truth? Conventional wisdom says it's the outsider. Natural choice, isn't he? Shows up, hides from everybody, probably got a small fortune out of the kid by one con or another, then dumps the body out here and leaves town. He and the kid left the house together three nights ago, never came back."

"And the granny? What's she?"

Clyde shook his head, took a drag, let it waft out his nose and the corners of his mouth while he spoke. I lit another just watching him. "Accomplice? Maybe she tried to warn the kid. Maybe she used to be his babysitter and she stopped by to say hello at the wrong time." He shook his head again. "Can't say. Regardless of who it was, I figure he'll turn up again. That's why I come out here a lot. He'd have to come back sometime. Too much attention on this one, he's going to come back to make sure he didn't leave anything untidy that might point to him. If I were the murdering sort I would worry too much about the Sheriff catching me but the SBI's a different story. If he's worried he'll want to double-check everything and if he's arrogant he'll want to gloat."

I smiled a little; I'd heard that tone before behind many of Clyde's hypotheticals. "You don't think it's the outsider, do you?"

Clyde hmphed and shook his head at the ground. "No, I don't." He took a long drag. "Song chasers go way up the mountain sometimes. They go out at night because it's quieter then and sometimes the only way to hear the old songs is to sneak up on a house where they're being sung by some hillbilly who shoots anyone who doesn't have their same last name. No, the outsider is the easy answer. My personal opinion..." Clyde paused, looked up at the sky, looked around in the direction of the trees that ringed the clearing some fifty yards away in any direction, went on. "It wouldn't be popular around here but I suspect he ran these folks across the wrong bunch of mountaineers somewhere and got himself in trouble with them. Maybe some old moonshiner, maybe somebody who married both his sisters. I don't know." Clyde shrugged halfway before clearing his throat and then straightening his back and his hat at the same time. "Anyway, I expect it's a lot simpler than some complicated con and a stranger. That's too neat and too messy all at the same time. Wouldn't be able to build much of a career at it, killing rich orphans and old women, would he? Meantime, it's too convenient for some of our fine citizens to point at an outsider and remain certain of their own purity." He spat suddenly, at the ground, the shadows. "A couple years of police work has taught me about purity."

I let him stand there without saying a word. He was headed away from the personal conclusions that I knew would endanger him – regardless of whether he was right – and I didn't see any need to get out and push along the way. Finally Clyde turned back to face me and put on something like a smile. "Anyway," he drawled, "We'll get 'em sooner or later."

I ran the details through my head again and sighed. I could afford to talk to him as my old

friend, for just a moment, rather than prey. "I have to tell you, my instincts are different on this one. I don't think you'll ever know who did it or why. I don't know who did it, Clyde, but I don't think you will, either. It's so random, there's nothing to tie it together. I wouldn't know where to begin." I smiled a little. "Not that I'm questioning your skills as a detective."

"Thanks." Clyde produced a soft, dark chuckle. "But I'm pretty sure I'm right." He nodded to himself. "Pretty sure." He enunciated each syllable distinctly, as though a separate word: pret tee sure.

We stood in silence for a couple of minutes, finished our cigarettes and eventually turned our attention to those two depressions again. After a few forevers had gone by, Clyde spoke. "You're looking well," he said.

I smirked, unseen in the dark. "Clean living." Clyde snorted loudly and I tsk'ed him. "Now, now. Judge not. How's Sarah?"

Clyde produced the most unguarded, honest expression I'd seen all night: a broad smile. "She's great," he said. "It's our fifth anniversary in seven weeks. Christmas, you know." He looked over. "We missed you at the wedding."

"Sorry." I chewed my lower lip for a second. "Business."

"I imagine your line of work does demand a lot of travel." Clyde didn't sound too wounded, which was kind of him. "Sarah hasn't seen you at all since graduation, said you're welcome any Sunday for lunch."

"Maybe this winter. Depending on the time."

Clyde nodded and looked away again. "It's been eleven years since we graduated from high school and nobody in this town has seen you since the day after we walked the stage. You didn't even show up for your family's funerals – didn't even have funerals in the first place."

I sighed a little. I'd figured he would get there eventually. "Yes, I did. I just didn't tell anyone about them. I wanted privacy."

"And the community wanted to say goodbye." Clyde wasn't angry this time, though. He was just sad. He coughed finally and shook it off. "None of my business. Sorry."

"No offense taken." My voice was low. I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to think about it. One day I'd have to open up that corner of my mind but not yet. I had plenty to think about, wonder about, to keep that far from the front burner. "Thanks for bringing me out here. I hope it doesn't get back to anybody. I just wanted to see for myself."

"Don't mention it." Clyde gestured with the flashlight and I went first, retracing my steps back to the cars. When we arrived, I walked over to mine with the keys already in my hand. He stopped halfway to his and the light swung around as he spoke. "Don't think anyone hates you or thinks you're too classy for them just because you went away. People get over things, they grow up. Sometimes I..." He paused and dug out another cigarette, lighting it. "Well, sometimes I think I know how you felt or maybe how you feel now, coming back here. I spent a long time at headquarters just training. I've seen enough of the local underbelly through fresh eyes to feel like

I can't really just walk out my front door in the morning and fit into the rest of the world. I..." He paused again, took a drag. I said nothing, indicated nothing, just listened. "I'm wasting your time," he finally sighed.

"No," I said, quick off the starting block. "You're the best friend I've got in this town – hell, this end of the state. You can tell me. I know what you mean. I went off to college and now this place feels like a pair of shoes I grew out of. Beat up, worn down, my toes pinched. Can't go anywhere without it hurting a little. If you need to talk, I've got a phone."

"Thanks. If nothing else, call us the next time you're in town. Maybe by then you can babysit for us." All of a sudden he was Clyde from shop class, carving a 2x4 into a shape you wouldn't show a Sunday School teacher. He and Susan had been going together for four years when they got married. They were perfect for each other. I'd tried to set them up when we were seniors but it didn't take for a couple years. Sarah was too smart for this town, always had been; so was Clyde. I couldn't believe it when I found out he'd bothered to go get educated and had wound up back here as the long arm of the law no one liked to see. The State Bureau of Investigation didn't help with cases back then, they took them away.

"Will do." I smiled, touched the brim of my hat – too small, too cheap, like all of mine were when hats were *de rigueur* – and got into the car and drove away.

I went fifteen miles, watching my mirrors the whole time, cutting across dirt roads, doubling back. Finally I pulled into an Esso way down out towards nowhere and stepped into the phone booth. "Operator," I murmured into the receiver, "I need to place a long distance call to Atlanta, charges reversed." It took a minute or two to get the call set up. When a voice came on the other line I kept my report simple and by the book:

"Suspected activity, natives blind."

"There will be a telegram to you tomorrow evening, Mr. Surret." Agatha's help were all very crisp, very professional. I outranked them, but only nominally. I hung up the phone, got back into the gray sedan I was driving at the time and set off for my motel. I had nothing but time to kill. Back then it felt like I'd never be out of time, that time just stretched out in front of me like so much endless highway I'd never have to leave or share or think about.

That was over fifty years ago. I was young and stupid.

Now I'm just old and stupid.

Tooth and Nail – Chapter One

Yesterday I got so old I felt like I could die.

--The Cure, "In Between Days"

-- 2008 --

Sudoku is probably the single greatest thing that ever happened to vampires.

That's what I was thinking when I pulled the Firebird into the driveway in Horse Shoe on my first return there in five years. I only go back every five, now. No need to stick around a lot, it's not like there are many of us up there. I'd been up on my victory lap – that's what Roderick called it – when I'd burned Bob down to a pile of bubbling fat a few years earlier and now simply resolved to make my visits with Clyde coincide with my friendly little check-ins with the tiny handful of us who can blend in across a rural population that sparse. Yeah, even in a little place like Henderson County there are tens of thousands of people and a vampire can *still* do a number on a town. It doesn't really matter that they – humanity – so vastly outnumber us; we so vastly overpower them, after all.

At any rate, I'd rung up and gotten a week's subscription to the *Times-News* before I came up to visit the old place so I'd have something to read, some source material for catching up on local events, puzzles to work on. Crosswords are good but sudoku is better. That's part of the deal with living forever, or at least a very long time: we have to work hard to stay nimble. The body doesn't age, doesn't weaken – quite the opposite – but the mind decays fast if one doesn't keep exercising it. I'd found chasing numbers around on a grid was satisfying and it stretched some corners of the brain I hadn't had to use in a while. I've tried buying the big books but they don't work for me. I don't want to become an expert, I want something to do when I get done reading the newspaper. Doing a book of puzzles feels too much like jogging in place. Doing the puzzle in the paper, the one everyone else has to do, that feels real.

I'd stopped on the way off the interstate to buy gas. The Firebird tears through that stuff, just eats it up. I should get something cheaper to run, probably, but nothing today feels as solid as a big slab of steel from the '70s. Sure, the paint is peeling and the panels are dinged and the seats are sagging and half-crushed, but it is my Firebird. We've been through a lot together. I

don't just give up on a car the first time something fancier catches my eye and I sure couldn't show up on a car lot at lunch to wrap up the paperwork on buying a new one. Oh, sure, walk in right after dark, pay cash, whatever, it can be done but it draws attention. It draws the notice of the IRS, of the bank, of the salesman in the first place. I'm always trying not to give in to that eternal temptation to just go completely off the grid, withdraw from legal life, because that way is madness. I know how it works for vampires who do that. They get proxies – butlers, assistants, interns, “nieces” - to do all the business but even if they try at first to do most of it themselves, keep a hand in, keep an ear to the ground of common experience, slowly over time they draw further and further back until they are just out there, somewhere, in the shadows, one too-curious patrolman or one nosy neighbor away from having everything taken in the white light of bureaucracy or a proxy who realizes he could walk away with the laundry or the car keys or the deed to the house. No, I want to keep things simple and I want to keep things *me*.

I've made concessions, of course. No man in his eighties looks like me, hair dark, face more or less unlined. Technically I'm my own grandson but it doesn't much matter given when I sign for something I put down my name: *Withrow Surrett*, just as bold as I please. Agatha doesn't like it, thinks it makes me conspicuous, but to hell with that. I am who I am. It really is that simple.

I gathered up the stack of newspapers from around the blue box at the end of the drive then turned and walked all the way back up the steep drive and up to the front door of the house. It was just pouring the rain in great sheets that night, a real drencher blowing up and over the mountains from southwest but I hadn't thought to bring an umbrella. Don't much care for them, to be honest. I'd rather feel the rain than insulate myself. I fished around for my keys, came up with them, tried a couple of different ones before I got one that would turn the lock. House keys, they all look alike these days. No personality at all.

Smiles, my Doberman, had followed me out of the car, down the drive, back up and was the first one into the house and into the dry. I closed the door behind me but didn't turn on the lights in the hall or anywhere else in the house. I could see just fine by the light of the VCR, blinking 12:00 at me every two seconds. I checked my watch, late but not so late I'd missed him. Clyde still went out to that field every five years, rain or shine.

I still went out to meet him every time.

I got Smiles set up with a bowl of kibble and some water and started turning on lights around the house, checking to see if any bulbs blew. I only turn the power on for a month every time I come up to visit so there are always a few surprises waiting for me. The wrapping on the pipes in the crawl space needed some work – something had gnawed at them over the summer – and the water ran a little dark for the first few seconds after blowing the air out. Old house, old pipes. I'd more or less finished the perimeter check when my cell rang and I fished it out of one of the pockets of my trench coat. The dial glowed at me: RODERICK.

“Cousin,” I said when I flipped it open and held it to my ear. “How do.”

"Withrow." Roderick purred my name. He purrs everybody's name. My cousin is... special. "I'm in Asheville. I can't find a decent place to stay in the countryside."

"Lots of good hotels around," I said, "But suit yourself. Been in long?"

"I got here three days ago, actually. You know, Asheville has a very rich history." He emphasized 'rich' as if it were a curse word he were using suggestively. "Hauntings, murders, suicides, ghostly hitch hikers, a headless horseman, all kinds of fun."

Roderick is... well, I don't know what to say about him. Anyway, he likes trouble. He likes to pry and poke.

"I see you've done some research," I replied, neutral. I paused, then: "I'm glad you're here."

"I promised I'd come visit," he said simply. "Emily sends all her love."

"Tell her same back, if you talk to her."

"When shall I come by?"

"I've got an appointment," I said. "I'll call you later tonight, maybe tomorrow. That okay?"

"Of course, cousin." Roderick sounded so calm. "I'll talk to you then."

He hung up then, and so did I.

The thing about my cousin is that he really is my cousin. That's not some weird *la familia* vampire bullshit. He's my cousin. He was born about twenty years after I was but through a weird set of coincidences we both got turned. He never knew his maker like I know mine, though. He was an orphan. I think it's part of what made him how he is. He lives in Seattle – grew up there – and the local boss keeps an eye on him for me. I've been to visit. It was weird, but I extended the invitation in return. He may be a freak but he's family and I love him just the same.

Around midnight I locked the place back up, left on a couple of lights in the living room and climbed back into the car. Smiles would be OK on his own for a bit; it never hurts to let the neighborhood hear and see your huge-ass dog when you're out of town for extended periods. If all the lights were with me I'd get out to see Clyde by half past and that would be right on time by our usual schedule. The rain was still coming down and I'd drenched myself peeking into the crawl space and checking the storm windows but I didn't much care. I turned on the heater in the Firebird and cranked some music and hit US 64 through town.

Hendersonville had changed a lot in just the five years I'd been gone. New houses everywhere. Old houses torn down and replaced. Whole sections of woods past which I'd normally drive on this route were gone and McMansions had been stacked two inches apart all over the nude slopes left in the forests' places. I scowled, turned the music up higher. There was a Chinese restaurant in Horse Shoe now. Nothing wrong with Chinese food, don't get me wrong, but it just... the time was, it couldn't support one "home-style" restaurant because people thought eating out was decadent. Everything had changed so much in my absence. Everything

had a sign in front of it now that started with the word "Historic." What they didn't tear down to replace with a big-ass box of a house where a retiree could live they turned into a museum. The anonymity of one neighborhood compared to another was grating. I used to be able to date the neighborhoods, the developments, the farm houses, one by one as I drove by. Now they all looked the same. For all the new growth, it felt like a place with the life drained out.

Henderson County, if you see it on a map, looks like a square that's stood up to stretch. It's higher, mountain-wise, on the western and northwestern ends than it is on the southeastern. In the northwest it's Horse Shoe, Etowah, Mills River, a few little communities that twenty or thirty or sixty years ago were nothing but a gas station and a few churches and a bunch of dairy farms. In the southeastern corner it's gas stations and churches and apple trees. In amongst it all, though, are housing developments that weren't there five years ago or ten years ago. Property values are through the roof. The county is growing. God only knows what people there actually do for a living. Some work in Asheville, some hoof it all the way down to Greenville or Spartanburg, maybe, but most of the people moving in are retirees. The dead and dying circle the countryside looking for an empty roost. The number one industry in that part of the world is health care and most of the health care industry is "retirement" care – buildings full of people who never get out of bed and the staff who wait for them to die. The rest homes all have waiting lists. If you don't want to wait, you go to some hole in the wall that reeks of the last days of hard living. There is nothing good in those places. I'd only ever been to a couple of them and I could not believe that people would do this to themselves, to one another, charge money for it, do the landscaping for it, approve the permits for it. Everything about it made me want to turn and run and never look back. Those places terrified me. Both times I'd been there I'd gone straight out into the night and found someone terrible and drained the life from them while they screamed. I'd killed to wipe away the images of all that slow death. Better to take a life that fights not to go than to institutionalize the process of dragging death out for years like that.

US 64 used to be the main artery through Henderson County, running roughly from the northwest to the southeast. I took it for ten or fifteen minutes into the heart of town, then turned right along the way and set off back up and down the mountains to the southwestern corner of the county. I couldn't get it out of my head, the whole way there, that the rest homes had come here to spawn, to prey, that as they grew and grew that sooner or later they'd all grow together and encompass the county and everyone in it would just be there to attend to that one patient as they waited for it to die.

Rain gushed down from the sky, so hard that finally even I pulled off at a convenience store – twenty four hour gas stations were one of the few advantages I could see of the county growing fat on the blood of the dead – and bought an umbrella. It was a simple, cheap, black number with manual everything. It was funny, actually, a manual umbrella cost more than one with buttons and spring-loaded everything. Whatever. I climbed back into the car and started back down the road and up the mountain towards my appointment. I'd be a little late, it looked

like, and Clyde certainly wasn't getting any younger. I hoped he didn't think I'd forgotten or abandoned him.

By 12:40 I'd reached the turn-off for the clearing. I arced around from the main highway on a road now paved - used to be dirt, and I wondered who'd paved it and what newly-minted mansion I'd find if I kept going past the field itself - until I reached the little gap in the trees where I had to pull in and park before walking the rest of the way.

Clyde's car was still there. It was two inches deep in mud. I'd have to help him get it out; not at all a difficult job for me, but he was going to be damned lucky to have a vampire there to help him. My Firebird, well, I could about carry it out myself if I had to. I still had a wench on the front, though, the 1970's answer to SUVs before there were SUVs. You never know what you'll get into out in the country. I killed the engine and sat in silence, listening to the rain pound the roof. He was probably half-soaked out there already. I grabbed the umbrella, climbed out, gave my eyes a moment to adjust.

You won't be surprised to hear that a vampire's eyes can *really* adjust to the dark, will you?

I squelched through the mud and the high grass, brown and bent by the autumn and approaching winter, through the trees. Twenty yards, thirty, forty. The trees used to be thinner here, the brush smaller. Whoever inherited the land didn't take care of it like their predecessor had. The first time Clyde and I had been out here it had been neatly trimmed, a fence on the far side carefully mended, no rust on the barbed wire, fresh nails in some of the posts. Now the fence had probably fallen down if it was still there. The undergrowth was thicker, there were briars pushing in over most of the ground. There were a few irregular paths through but they were deer trails, nothing more. This had become a forgotten place.

I started off through the undergrowth and stopped short a few feet in. I'd have sworn I smelled, for just a moment, blood. Fresh. Well, fairly fresh. Spilled tonight, I'd wager, but then, just like that, it was gone. I stood stock still, sniffing the air in silence, but couldn't pick anything up through the rain. Finally I kept going. Maybe Clyde had snagged an arm on one of these brier bushes. Whatever. I'd fed on the way out of Raleigh, I wouldn't be a danger to anyone who smelled of a couple cuts tonight.

I stepped out of the trees and into the dark field. Anyone else would have been blind out here in the rain and the dark, what little moon there should have been entirely shut out by the clouds. Even I was having trouble with anything at much of a distance. I reached into my pockets and produced a cigarette, lit it. Protected as it was by the umbrella I was able to keep it dry and I got a little light from it, enough to walk confidently and to see that there was something, someone - Clyde, I guessed - out in the middle of the field, more or less where I'd expect him to be. I walked closer and, the closer I got, the less it looked right. He was sitting down on the ground - no, make that laying down on the ground. I ditched the cigarette, flicking it off into the dark and the rain, and took off running towards him.

Clyde was white as a sheet and laying face-down on the ground. I didn't need to be a vampire to tell he was dead. Anyone would have looked at that form and known it was a corpse. One thin – no, frail – arm was up over his head, the other under him. He wore a long, heavy coat, galoshes over his shoes, thick corduroy pants, a flannel shirt. He looked like a retired lumberjack. His hair was thin, patchy, his scalp splotchy with age. His face was lined.

His eyes were open wide. He'd died in absolute terror of what killed him.

My last living mortal friend looked so very, very old.

I spent a half minute just standing there over him, staring. It took some time for the vampire instincts to kick in. He'd been dead for a few hours at most. He'd been drained of all blood – I couldn't smell any and there wasn't any on the ground. Even in the rain there'd be some left if he'd bled out here. He'd been killed somewhere else, drained and brought here in his own car, then left behind. Or he'd been killed by someone who met or followed him here and drained cleanly before being ditched. A part of me – the part of me that always hunts – started to make me turn around and go back, look for his footprints, smell his car. The part of me that remembered an old friend from high school kept staring at him, though. He must have been, God, well, we'd graduated together. He was eighty three years old.

Same age as me.

I reached down and wrapped my right hand in one corner of my coat, then gripped his shoulder and turned him very slowly. The neck had been slit with something sharp. It hadn't happened here. If it had, there'd still be blood no matter how big a barrel the killer had held under him when he made the slice. He probably didn't live long enough to bleed to death; he'd probably drowned before that. Leaning closer, I could smell the blood when I tilted his head back a little, dead blood, pooled in his lungs. My stomach turned. He didn't even appeal to the very worst part of me as food. He was just a dead thing. His mouth was open, the skin stretched tight around his eyes – mad, with the whites showing as big as a Kennedy half-dollar. His eyebrows were up, stretched high. Water had pooled in the lines and crevices of his face and ran out of his eyes like great tears when I moved him.

I rolled him back over, putting him as he had been, stood up, turned my back, drew a slow, shaky breath and let out one long, quivering, sudden, strangled sob. Before I could do anything I dropped the umbrella, raised both hands to my face and bent double to weep openly, angrily, shaking my whole fat-ass body up and down its length, my back spasming, my shoulders jerking against and away from themselves. I cried out – wailed like an animal – until the anger underneath the tears welled up all of a sudden and I stood straight, threw my head back and cried out high and horrible and piercing. Rain fell in my mouth, up my nose, pattered against the eyelids I'd squeezed shut. All I could hear was rain and wind and in the distance the occasional car on the old country highway I'd taken to get here. I hated everyone in those cars, everything about them, hated whatever they were doing that they weren't here weeping with me. I threw

my arms out and screamed again, shrill, then descending into a yell, then a groan, then a few more sobs as I finally squatted and then sat in the rain, the mud, water soaking the coat under me in an instant.

I sat beside my dead friend and I cried for long minutes, wept out all the years I could.

Clyde was dead – murdered – and I already missed him.

When I looked at my watch it was past one o'clock in the morning. I'd sat there and shaken and cried out and sobbed for the better part of twenty minutes and I could tell I wasn't done yet. Still, I had to get moving at some point. I had to leave. I had to get out of there before someone found me with him. I had to go home, clean up, get my brain working. I had to find out who had done this to him, why. I had to track them down and put my hands around their neck and make them stare me in the face – my real face, the one with fangs – and make them wish they'd never been born. The prowler that lives in our guts never really sleeps and a lot of bad emotions can make it come out but the worst one is anger.

I was so very, very angry.

I stood up, hefting all three hundred fifty pounds of myself back onto my legs, and set off to the car. I got halfway there when I remembered the umbrella, turned around, went back for it. It had blown a few feet away. I kicked myself for leaving footprints all over the area where the body – where Clyde – was. I was fucking up a crime scene in a major way and tomorrow or the next day or sometime there would be cops crawling all over this place. I went back trying to mangle my own prints but all I did was make new ones on top of the old ones. I cried out again in anger, started stabbing my old footprints with the butt end of the umbrella to deform them, backtracked all the way to the car like that. I got in, gunned the engine hard, then got back out after a moment and walked over to Clyde's car. I could see the keys in the ignition. I could see a couple of paperbacks on the front seat, a half-full ashtray, a cassette sticking out of a tape player. Clyde was driving the same car he'd had the last two times I'd been here, an early '90s sedan of American make. It was a sensible car – a little get up and go, space, weight, average gas mileage. It was an old man's car.

The cassette was probably a book. He liked books on tape. I'd meant to bring him one and forgotten.

I put my hand back in the fold of my coat and tried the door. It was unlocked. There was a scent there besides Clyde's. I didn't recognize it, but I stood there snuffling the air for a long time to make sure I had it down good. I'd know it the next time I smelled it, that much was sure.

I slammed Clyde's car door shut so hard the window rattled and then climbed back into the old Firebird. I floored it a couple of times to rev the engine, then put it in low and backed very slowly out of the mud and onto the blacktop. I got out and went back through messing up my tire tracks as I'd done with my foot prints. The cops would know someone had been here and that

they didn't want to be spotted. I hadn't spotted any tracks in the mud – such as those of Clyde's killer – but he'd been dead so long they'd probably been done away with by the rain already. Maybe mine would be gone by the time someone found him, I thought. Maybe all this is just wasted effort, just something to do with the time I'd have spent talking to him.

Or maybe I was going to call the cops, against my better judgement.

I got back into the car, cranked the stereo as hard as it would go and took off into the night to ask myself that last question over and over again while I drove around, hit dirt roads, doubled back.

By the time I'd gotten fifteen miles away I was in the southeast of the county, out among the apple farms. Fifty five years later the gas station was still there. There was still a pay phone. I thought about it, but there were probably also security cameras.

I kept driving.

On the way back home I passed the old Edneyville high school. It'd been abandoned at some point. It was just a shell of a building, windows boarded, some of the boards missing and any others that were reachable covered in graffiti that mimicked without matching the graffiti of a real city with real graffiti. It was crude, childish, the autographs of a teen population that saw no reason to leave anything standing when they left.

There were two phone booths on one wall. On a whim I stopped and got out to check them. One was hanging by some wires but the other produced a dial tone. I stood there with the phone in my hand, then hung it back up, shoved my hands into a coat pockets, wrestled the receiver back off, wiped it down, managed to get it between my face and my shoulder. I dialed 911 with fingers made extra thick by the trench coat and when the operator picked up I spoke in a flat monotone.

"There's a body. He's dead." I gave quick directions, then said, "Where those bodies were found in the '50s." I paused again. The operator asked if I needed medical attention, if I was still there. After long seconds of silence I said, "I didn't do it."

I hung up the phone, got back in my car and drove away. It was stupid to attract the cops to where I'd just been, stupid to call them myself, stupid to do anything about it at all other than melt back into the shadows. But... it was Clyde. He wasn't just someone. He was my friend. He'd been a cop, himself. I couldn't leave him out there. I couldn't bed down for the day and pretend I hadn't seen him there, known he was dead, couldn't do nothing.

I drove home in silence, listening to the rain and the wiper blades.

No music.

No nothing.

Not even tears.

Officially, my name is Withrow Surrett III. The truth is there never was a junior, much less III. It's a pain in the ass these days to get the paperwork done but the fixers love it. It used to

be a lot easier – a birth certificate in a country hospital somewhere, signed by a doc who was a drunk, that kind of thing. It has always been easy to find prey in the great wash of humanity, whether for blood or for graft. These days everything's in a computer somewhere. You need a fixer to do "records insertion" in all the right places. You spend most of one legal adult life building records for the next one, then assume that one and start all over again. I've been Withrow Surrett III for nearly fifteen years and I'm already behind on building a life for Me IV.

Anyway, that's a part of why I should have just melted away and not drawn attention. Attention is the very last thing any of us wants. The records might not hold up on close examination. The paperwork might not have ever gotten done in the first place if you don't ride the fixer pretty hard when they're doing a job for you, for that matter. Then there are the usual concerns, the ones you probably think of first: getting stuck in a cell with a window, getting caught feeding, getting jumped by a rent-a-cop in the bushes out behind a nightclub when you're running low and half crazy from starvation, being unpleasantly surprised when you show up in a photograph or a portrait on display in a historical exhibit down at Town Hall, that kind of stupid stuff. All that used to happen a lot but it's mostly the oldsters who get caught with their pants down in those circumstances. If you got turned in the 20th century you're pretty good at living in the modern world. If you're pre-World War I, you're pretty screwed if you're not a fast learner, especially if you've been taking a dirt nap for a while. I've heard tell of vampires who bedded down in immigrant communities peopled entirely by their personal herds and never been seen again. I'm forced to wonder if they sometimes stir in their long sleep when they hear the heavy machinery of urban redevelopment rumble by up top and what would happen if any of them found their coffins unearthed in the middle of the afternoon. It wouldn't be pretty. It would probably get labeled terrorism and hushed up, though.

People. Always the same.

You're probably wondering right about now why on Earth I was out meeting a friend from high school, then, if I was so shy about the long arm of the law. Clyde, well, he was a friend I couldn't easily escape. He asked around about me if I wasn't seen much. He was a State Bureau of Investigation agent so my maker was shy about eliminating him, I think. He knew, eventually. Couldn't help noticing that I was staying late 20's and he was pushing retirement, could he? We never much talked about it. We did talk, mind you, but not much. I don't know if he ever told Sarah. He'd always tell me she said hello. I was so proud of setting the two of them up and I guess over the years maybe they turned into something I felt I'd done that was good in the midst of all I've had to do that probably wasn't so good.

Enough of that, though. More than enough. I'd thought myself half to death by the time I pulled up in the driveway back in Horse Shoe and parked the Firebird right in front of the front door so I wouldn't have far to go in the rain. I hadn't minded it earlier but now I couldn't be fussed with it. I'd been too wet tonight, too cold, too old and too much had changed. I wanted to be inside. I wanted to turn on the old baseboard heat and pull up a chair by the window and read

a week's worth of newspapers and not think about my friend.

The newspapers – the *Times-News* – didn't hold a lot of comfort for me. I couldn't focus myself enough to do any puzzles, not even the crossword, and when I flipped to the front page of the paper from a week before all that had greeted me had been news of a single-car accident up in Laurel Park around the country club. I looked at the pictures, taken as they were from a discreet distance, and sighed at all that death and destruction. Big deal. Another day in the mortal world: something burned, someone suffered, somewhere there was starvation and sadness. I read a little further down and then arched an eyebrow at a detail mentioned in the story: Dwayne Sherill, *retired SBI agent*.

That made me sit up straight in my chair. Not a good week to be SBI, some colder, more calculating part of me thought to itself. I kept reading and saw a pretty generic quote along the lines of "he was a great officer, a great friend," all the usual stupid bullshit and arched the other eyebrow at to whom it was credit: Clyde Wilfred. My friend Clyde had been this guy's partner as an investigator.

I whistled long and low and then set that paper aside and moved on to the one after it. No especially scary headlines in this one. I read it for a while, then moved on to the next. In its obituaries section I saw something that made me actually stand up from my chair in silent surprise: Sarah Wilfred, 83. Cardiac arrest. Clyde's wife died four days before the night I arrived.

Now was not the time to stand around wondering at coincidences. I flipped open my phone and dialed the last number that called me.

"Cousin?"

"Cousin," I said. "I think you'd best come over tonight."

Roderick was quiet for a second. When he spoke I could hear him smiling. "I'll be there in thirty minutes. I'll bring an overnight bag."

Roderick arrived in twenty minutes. He was driving a flash little sports car. It was a rental, it probably cost a fortune a day. Back home in Seattle he drives a Caddie from the '60s. It's a convertible. Roderick is sort of trapped in 1969. Lucky for him, that's in fashion again. I told him the short version of finding Clyde out in the field.

"Your last living friend?" Roderick was facing the window. I'd left the house dark for no real reason other than that I didn't need the light and I wanted to be able to look out into the night. He turned and leaned his back against the glass. Smiles was curled on the old couch, snuffling in his sleep. I sat at the writing desk against one wall, the chair turned around and my bulk leaning forward against its back. Roderick's face was mostly invisible in the shadows. "That's a long time to wait for Twilight."

"Just lucky, I reckon."

Roderick quirked up one side of his mouth.

"Don't give me a bunch of shit," I growled.

"I've no idea what you mean, cousin."

"You were about to suggest I'd be luckier if it had happened ages ago."

Roderick produced a noise like a soft chuckle. "Blood does know its own."

I made the same noise back at him. "So here's the thing. I called the cops to report Clyde's body." I put up a hand when Roderick opened his mouth. "I was careful. Trust me. Regardless, they're going to be all over this. His partner? Tragic accident. Wife? Old age. Throat slit and his body dumped at the scene of the most famous crime he investigated?" I trailed off, then swallowed in what I hoped was silence. "Sheriff's deputies are probably there now. The crime scene investigator has been paged. They start with the dogs first, then they bring in a photographer, then some bright lights and the lab guys." I stood up, tucked my hands in my pockets, made for the door onto the back porch, where my cigarettes sat on a small, metal table beside a large, wicker chair. "They're going to draw the same conclusion I jumped to and I assume you did, too." I opened the door and stepped through, settled into my chair. Roderick followed, leaning on one of the posts that holds up the roof of the porch. Roderick does that a lot: leaning. "They're going to assume this is connected to a murder Clyde investigated fifty years ago."

"The problem?" Roderick had produced a cigarette from somewhere with an illusionist's flourish. All vampires smoke. I don't know why. Fire's one of the few ways to take us out, and maybe that's what fascinates us.

"That murder was committed by a vampire. I felt it in my bones then and I'm just as sure now."

"Some signature that makes you think that? Some tell-tale sign?" Roderick never speaks with smoke in his lungs. He would take a drag, then exhale long and focused, then breathe in again and speak.

"No." I shook my head. "Well, yes. I smelled vampire at the time, but more importantly, it's a question of physics and fitness. Anyone who could kill three people then would be at least seventy now. No seventy year old could slit Clyde's throat, carry him out there and get back out without his car." I shrugged.

"And you'd like to solve the mystery Clyde never could?" Roderick's voice was soft.

I shifted in my seat, made a noise of contempt in my throat, though I didn't indicate for what. "No, there's a vampire out there I don't know about and it's my job to know them all." I lifted one shoulder. "It's my state. This is my yard. All of it is my yard."

Roderick watched me for a few moments and then smiled. "Ice."

"Ice?"

"In your veins," Roderick said. His smile widened.

Tooth and Nail – Chapter Two

Time to show some sharper teeth, time to grow a thicker skin.

--Faith and the Muse, "Sredni Vashtar"

"Nice night for it, eh?" Deputy Hendricks was standing with his thumb hitched in his belt and a pot belly still in its infancy poking over the buckle. He'd been the first officer on the scene and had put up tape everywhere at first, then realized he was going to run out of black and yellow CRIME SCENE – DO NOT CROSS – CRIME SCENE – DO NOT CROSS way before he got all the way around the clearing so it was down to a few stakes in the ground in a ten yard perimeter around the body. The mud was tramped down and stomped all over by him before anyone else had arrived so that H'Diane, her big, powerful flashlight trained on the ground, could tell she wouldn't find a good goddamned thing on the ground. She turned the light up towards him briefly, then swung it in an arc.

"As good as any," she said. God, but she was nervous. This was her first crime scene as a detective in her first job as a detective. She'd been a cop long enough to know the drill, been the first one on the scene more than once, knew better than to walk everywhere and screw up everything like this. That had been a long time ago, though, in a city with a – but here she stopped herself.

These are real cops, too, she thought. I can't think of them as nothing but bumpkins if I'm ever going to cut it in this job.

"The wagon's twenty minutes out." She drew a breath and started to run through her personal checklist. "I need a media containment area somewhere out of sight of the body in case anyone catches wind of this. I need someone directing traffic down at the main road and I need someone to call the dog handler."

"Smith and Jeffers are on their way," Hendricks drawled in reply.

"Great, go down to the main road and pick a spot for their cars, then start handing out assignments. I want total coverage of the site. I want twenty minutes in this clearing and then I want a deputy with a drawn sidearm patrolling the edge of the trees. Anybody caught spying, book them for trespass and see if they piss down their own leg."

Hendricks arched an eyebrow. This lady detective was different beyond being some Chinese type. He reached up to scratch under his Sheriff's Department cap and opened his mouth. "We'd need to call in some extra deputies if you want all that."

"So somebody manages to do sixty in a fifty-five tonight," H'Diane shot back. "Don't you

read the paper?"

Hendricks blinked owlshly at her.

"This guy," H'Diane said, and she pointed at the body of Clyde Wilfred, "Is one of us."

"All due respect," Hendricks said after a moment, "But he weren't with the Sheriff's Department. He was SBI."

"Which makes him a cop." H'Diane kept her voice even. "I want to do this right." She paused, and tried another tactic. "He lived here all his life."

Hendricks ran that through his own personal loyalty-determination subroutine and then nodded slowly. "I'll head on down to the highway, wave Smith and Jeffers in, hand out some assignments. You alright up here by yourself for a few minutes?"

"Yes." H'Diane tried not to get angry. Getting angry her first time out wouldn't make her any friends and this was a department where everything was based on friendship and subtle tests of loyalty and hidden standards. "Thank you, Deputy Hendricks."

Hendricks nodded and started to stroll away, one hand still hooked in his belt, one hand swaying. He looked like Elvis, H'Diane thought to herself. Old Elvis, but Elvis.

Twenty minutes later she had gone over the crime scene as thoroughly as she could while standing back ten feet from the body. Her flashlight was a monstrous sun in her hand, blinding white light so bright it bleached everything in its beam; she ran it slowly back and forth over the form of Clyde Wilfred and then the ground around him in a slow spiral that ran out to her own feet over time. There were mangled prints, no blood, not even the smell of blood. No stains on his shirt, very little dried at the gaping wound in his throat. He hadn't been hung up and bled or there'd be crusts in his hair. On the other hand, it had pissed down rain for hours that night and just let up in the last forty minutes or so. It might have all washed away. It was cold that night, her breath misting in front of her, thick gloves on her hands, so that would screw with the time of death. Being planted out here all night was no better than being shoved in a refrigerator. They'd need a full autopsy to sort that out.

Deputy Smith – young kid, eager, helpful, H'Diane liked him – walked up making plenty of noise so she'd know he was there. "Got an ID?" he called.

"I recognize him from the paper," H'Diane called back, "But I haven't gone into his wallet yet. Waiting on the photographer.

"That's me, ma'am. Detective. I mean, Detective." He produced a big Polaroid from a bag. "Got the digital, too, if you want that instead."

"Plenty of both," she replied. "Document everything. If you need the lights set up, radio down to Jeffers. I assume he's setting up the media area?"

Smith nodded and pointed off into the night. "Other side of the private road, no sight lines to here."

"Good work," she nodded. She didn't smile. She had a feeling detectives shouldn't smile

next to dead bodies. They don't cover that in training, but she was still pretty sure. She kept walking in a slow circle around the body: some mottled skin around the wrists and neck. The face was locked in an expression of fear. You can, of course, rearrange someone's expression after death but the killer hadn't even tried. They were in a hurry or they were sadistic. Or both. She pondered that one in silence, crouched close to the ground, looking into his glassy eyes, when she heard someone clear her throat behind her.

H'Diane stood and turned. "Jeffers," she said halfway around, "I'm going to need a perimeter patrol - " but she stopped when she saw that it was LaVonde. LaVonde smiled a little, produced a miniature digital tape recorder and held it out.

"Comment for the *Citizen-Times*?"

LaVonde and H'Diane had been together for four years. Four weird years that started with them running into each other at the scene of a meth lab that had been burned in a murder/arson. LaVonde liked to joke that it was their first date. H'Diane figured she'd probably been awakened by the phone but hadn't counted on LaVonde staying awake, hearing her side of the conversation, coming down here to write a story.

H'Diane wasn't out at work. Well, not yet. It was one of those weird things about being a woman, a cop, a professional, a lesbian, an out gay woman in the twenty first century: you don't really *come out* anymore. It just happens in time. Or... it doesn't. There's no real way to engineer either outcome without seeming like you have an agenda or a problem with yourself. The world had changed so much in H'Diane's life and so much of it was scary but a lot of it also seemed to be for the better. This was one of those things. Being out at work didn't have to feel like a very special episode of *Law & Order* anymore. On the other hand, that it didn't *have to* meant it was kind of frowned upon to make it feel like one anyway.

H'Diane sighed a little, drew a breath. Smith, bless his heart, he just didn't know what to think. There was a sort of electric tension in the air between the new detective and the reporter. He couldn't put his finger on it to save his life, so he just stood there for a second. "We're setting up a media area," he blurted out, pointing... well, somewhere else. LaVonde smiled at him for a moment, then very obviously leaned her head to one side to peek around H'Diane at the corpse.

"A murder?"

H'Diane didn't let herself smile. "Deputy Smith," she said, very calm, "Please show Ms. Burke to the media area." She turned back. She didn't cross her arms, didn't shift her weight to one hip, just stood there with her hands by her side and her face as blank as a bedroom wall in an empty house. "The Sheriff's Department will issue comment, as appropriate, as soon as we can."

LaVonde smiled. She couldn't help it. She didn't say anything, though, just nodded once, clicked off the recorder, put it in her jacket pocket. "Deputy Smith," and as she said her tone didn't quite mock H'Diane. "Please do as the detective asked."

"Yes... ma'am?" Smith scratched his forehead, cap lifted, then tugged it back on and

started squelching away through the mud.

Do they all do the cap thing? Diane smiled, finally, when they were far enough away that they wouldn't hear her face crack. She was going to kill LaVonde for this. They had talked about it already, after all.

In the end, the Sheriff himself showed up, lights going, siren blaring, like the last clown car late for the circus. He got out, did a meaningful and photo-friendly walk around the site. There were only a few media people there at this hour, the sun just about to rise. By six in the morning there would be TV trucks down the road but the owners of the property wouldn't let them on their land to broadcast so all they had were shots of grey, autumnal countryside and news readers repeating the same "breaking" news over and over again. LaVonde went back home and wrote up a story to go on the *Citizen-Times* site, then started on something longer for the print edition.

H'Diane stayed at the scene to brief the Sheriff, then the dog team, then observe them working. They picked up a scent and spooked immediately. They didn't like what they'd picked up. Not at all. They followed it out of the clearing, through some brush and to some tire tracks that had either been driven over or messed around with to disguise the treads. They sniffed it around the victim's car, too, and the handlers thought they'd picked up a different scent in the cars but it didn't lead much of anywhere. The rain had ruined a lot of the tracking they could do. The handlers weren't any happier to be out in the middle of nowhere at goddamn o'clock in the morning, either, and continued sweeps of the woods around the scene didn't turn up a damned thing.

H'Diane - Detective Bing - went straight to the station, drank three cups of coffee and then started going over crime scene photos. The coroner was working the body, the scene evidence was being bagged and tagged to go to the Asheville SBI office, the digital photos coming out of the printer and the Polaroids up on the wall in a conference room. She did a quick debrief with each of the Deputies, focusing on Hendricks as the first one on the scene. She didn't tear him a whole new one for having fucked up the scene by walking all over it so much as she pointed out where, exactly, the new one would be torn if he messed it up again. She did some reading on the victim's history, re-read all the stories about his partner being killed in a car crash and his wife dying of a heart attack, assigned some deputies on day shift to start interviewing the neighbors.

Then she finally - *finally* - got the recording of the 911 call.

"I didn't do it," the voice drawled. She wound it back, played it again.

"I didn't do it."

"I didn't do it."

"I didn't do it."

She started making notes. Male, sounded to be... well, his voice was odd. He sounded sort of young, but not *young*, not a kid. There was something in it, though; there was something old there. He was so calm as he said it, but H'Diane knew the sound of creepy calm, the sound of

someone who's just shot their whole family dead and calls 911 so there will be someone to find and bury them after the shooter kills himself, and it wasn't that. Was it? She shook her head and listened to the whole thing again. He'd been there. He knew exactly where it was. He drove a long way across the county to use a pay phone that wasn't supposed to work anymore - caller ID long ago put the lie to the television trope that a call has to run for a while before it can be traced - and then called it in as pretty as you please. Of course there weren't security cameras at Edneyville School. The place hadn't been a school in fifteen years at least, according to Deputy Smith.

H'Diane played the recording for what seemed like an hour. White, male, young but not that young, knew what happened, left the scene, didn't want trouble with the law. H'Diane had done her homework when she finished that degree in Criminal Justice and trained to be a detective. Most leads dissolve in the first forty-eight hours after a case. Investigators have to work fast and be thorough if they can track down enough information to actually produce an arrest or, to be honest, even a serious questioning.

She needed to find out who that was, and fast, before he was gone forever.

"You know that's where that old murder happened, right?" This was LaVonde's greeting to H'Diane when she walked in the door that night, stiff, sore, too caffeinated, too tired.

"Yeah, my day was a bitch," she sighed. They kissed hello, then H'Diane slid into a chair at the kitchen table.

LaVonde waited a moment, then dove right back in. "That old murder. Fifty five years ago. The double homicide down off Green River Road." She pulled open the phone book. Nobody was in any shape to cook and delivery pizza seemed like a good idea to the desperate. LaVonde paused in flipping pages and then said, pointedly, "Where we were this morning?"

"Triple homicide?"

"Yes, sugar, triple homicide. Did no one in the department mention this to you?"

H'Diane blinked and shook her head.

LaVonde scowled a little, but not unkindly. "Figures," she said. "Bunch of good ol' boy crackers. Wanted to know if you'd figure it out yourself."

"Great, so what's the story?"

LaVonde picked up the phone, dialed, ordered, hung up. In that time, H'Diane sat there and stretched back and leaned against the wall, crossing her feet at the ankles. The cold outside felt like it could creep right in through the walls and she hunched her shoulders closer and crossed her arms.

"Con man comes into town, shacks up with a rich orphan, lures the kid and a little old lady from out near Brevard into the woods somehow and kills them both. Never seen again. Hell, hardly seen when he was playing Daddy May I with the kid." H'Diane arched one eyebrow and

LaVonde arched hers back in confirmation. "Anyway, their bodies were found right there. Same spot. Clyde Wilfred was the lead investigator. It was the first case he and Dwayne Sherrill worked together in their time at the SBI. Still technically an open case but no one's pursued anything in decades." LaVonde shrugged. "Might be of interest to you so I printed some scans from the morgue at the *Citizen-Times*."

"And nobody told me at the station," H'Diane mumbled.

"Don't think of it as them trying to trip you up, honey," LaVonde cooed as she walked over to plant another kiss on H'Diane. "Think of it as them believing you're smart enough to figure it out on your own."

"Sure," H'Diane sighed, but she reached for the printouts and started reading. Much later, pizza half-eaten, she set the papers aside and turned to LaVonde. "You can't write about this case, you know."

"I know," LaVonde sighed. "Conflict of interest. But I'm an editor now. I don't get to write about it anyway." H'Diane cocked an eyebrow. No editor didn't also write for the paper. LaVonde had the good grace to look a little mollified about such an obvious lie. "Okay," LaVonde went on, "I won't write about it."

That doesn't mean I can't investigate. Or encourage.

"You know, Clyde Wilfred has a son." LaVonde said it as mildly as she possibly could.

"No comment." H'Diane smiled a little as she replied.

"From what I've heard, nobody can find him..."

"No comment." This time, H'Diane didn't smile as much.

Tooth and Nail – Chapter Three

Are you dead or are you sleeping? God I sure hope you are dead.

--Modest Mouse, "Satin in a Coffin"

Roderick had asked me if I was going to call Agatha in on this – a vampire that might be lurking unknown in the woods of my original home territory and that part of it farthest from where I made my home in modern times. No, I'd told him. I have to handle this myself. Have to cut those apron strings sooner or later.

"Maybe I can help?" Roderick asked.

"Maybe," I'd said. No promises. No guarantees.

The thing is, I took over North Carolina a few years back. The old boss, Bob, he was this good ol' boy from a long line of Bobs just like himself. They'd run the state – him and his make before him and his before *him* for so long nobody was around who remembered a pre-Bob era at all. At least, no one who'd admit to being that old. You might expect that age would be a status symbol amongst our kind and for some, in some places, it is. Here in the States, though, the current vogue is to seem as young and precocious as possible. I'd had reason to believe Agatha was at least a hundred, maybe a hundred fifty years old as a vampire plus twenty or thirty years tacked on at the beginning but she'd never say. Asking point blank would be the worst possible offense, so no dice there. Anyway, the deal is, a lot of us, especially the ones who stake out some territory as their own and make themselves boss, we like to claim a youth long lost to us. I think it's in part because we're American vampires and American culture has been youth-oriented since at least the second half of the nineteenth century and youth-oriented since at least the 1920's.

Anyway, I just barely make the cut on having been born in that era of youth-oriented culture and you know what? I'm fed up with it. Vampires have adopted it as some sort of peg to hang their hat on like demure society types, so eager to prove a virility that's been lost to them for as long as they can remember. When the big flush happens, we're stuck. That's it. We learn new stuff, sure. I can drive an automatic, I can use a cellular phone, I can do a Sudoku puzzle. I'm not *young*, though. I'm not who I was then. I don't have the same capacity to learn and adapt that I used to have – and that's the thing with proxies and thralls and servants and fixers, they don't help with that. I suspect they accelerate it. They free up people like Agatha from the complicated work of learning how the world functions these days so that she can devote her time to *pretending* to understand. She mimics. She apes. She doesn't actually comprehend. It drives me crazy.

So what does this have to do with Roderick? Roderick got stuck – got turned – in 1969. Like I said, lucky for him that's back in fashion right now, but what happens when it isn't? More important to me at the time was this: what did it mean about him *now*? Three weeks before he got turned he was arrested in a drug bust. His daddy got him out – we had money but my father's brother had *money* – and then turned up dead the same night Roderick became a vampire. I've always had to wonder about that. It's traditional for our families to get eliminated after we're turned. Their sudden absence from the scene prevents a lot of uncomfortable questions. It doesn't happen as much these days as it used to, but it still happens sometimes. It's something that's getting harder to do, I suspect, in the age of forensic scientists. Regardless, I'm left wondering this: did Roderick kill his father? His mother was already dead, no siblings, no relatives left but me and he didn't know I was still around in any meaningful sense. Did his maker – whoever that was, he or she didn't stick around – do it? Or was it coincidence? And if it was Roderick, well... let's just say Rod's always been a little screwy. Tie that in with a culture of rebellion in which he was a participant at the time he was turned and you get somebody who might be a fearsome vampire, indeed.

And that's why Emily, the local boss in Seattle, keeps an eye on him for me.

Just as an aside, vampires hate the idea of mortal relatives both being turned. It's... perverted, somehow. That biological tie lingering after biology stops being an issue and mortal ties and meanings are supposedly washed away? It makes us uncomfortable. Maybe that's why I'm always sort of scared to hang with Roderick and always sort of eager. It gives Agatha the creeps that he's still around and that we're still in touch.

That, despite everything else, is an excellent reason to have these little family reunions every once in a while.

As to the question of what to do about Clyde's murder and the chance a vampire had done it, well, I was fairly in the dark. I could come up with all sorts of situations to explain it – a vengeful child of the murderer from back then, a vampire who'd done the deed and trying to clean house for some reason or another, someone who wasn't at all related but got put away by Clyde and Dwayne back in their past. The only thing I could do was start nosing around without trying to tip my hand. Twilight is supposed to be a tender time for my kind, that severing of the very last tie we had to our mortal lives. If a vampire did this there was just as good a chance that they did it purely to throw me off balance, psychologically, and if they did that then they must be making a play for power of their own.

Yes, now was a good time to start visiting other vampires – which is why I was here anyway – and to seem very, very nonchalant. First on the list: a kid named Marty Macintosh.

Marty lived in some anonymous apartment complex in Arden. Arden is a non-town between Hendersonville and Asheville, a series of shopping centers and apartment developments on US 25. It was where the first megaplex went in, long years ago. When that happened and a

Wal-Mart went in next door I knew it was over for Arden. Forever could pass and it would stay a bunch of rental condos and strip malls. Way back in the day Arden had grown up around the railroad tracks that ran south out of Asheville towards the upstate and everything else south and west of the city. It had been a place where factories went up, warehouses were built. The presence of industry was long since a thing of the past. Now it's endless suburbia. The passenger trains went first and then most of the shipping lines. The tracks are grass-covered skeletons these days. Sometimes a train will rattle past on them but it's a rare thing and it sounds like a ghost drumming skeletal fingers against an old desk. I drove north on NC 280, still finding it weird to take the new Boylston Highway through what used to be fields and meadows, a straight shot, rather than the old way around on Airport Road past the state research farm. What had to be the last plane of the night was coming in for a landing at Asheville Regional as I scooted around the turn at the end of the runway; it was a jet. I remember when the biggest, best plane that flew into or out of there was a refitted puddle-jumper that had started life as a Yugoslav transport plane in World War II.

That's one of the hard things about being a vampire; our eyes are so good we can see the past superimposed on the present and all the clutter gets in the way of seeing the future.

I drove on past the airport and past where there's a Target and a Best Buy now – just so insane to me – and where the Huddle House used to be until it got turned into a Starbucks. Then on beside a branch line of those Arden railroad tracks until I hit US 25 and turned left (north) into Arden. I was halfway to Biltmore when I saw that damned megaplex and knew I was nearly there. It'd been five years since I'd last seen Marty and I'd lost the directions I got out of Bob's files after he died but I'm pretty good at remembering that sort of thing so I caught the next left after the Asheville Racquet Club and then took the series of twisting turns that put me in the back corner of a complex of apartment blocks called Tournament Landing.

It's funny, names like that. I read a story – a news story – about a guy who made up a development or apartment complex name generator on a webpage somewhere, just as a gag. It would spit out combinations like Deer Hunter Trails and Creek's Edge Estate and whatnot based on a simple formula of, if I remember correctly, (Animal or Geographic Feature) plus (Activity or Geological Feature) plus (Landscaping Term). Clever enough idea to get a chuckle, sure, but then he started getting calls from real developers who wanted to know if they could use the names they'd generated playing around with it. When a real estate mogul is ready to let some webpage somewhere name their new neighborhood rather than name it something meaningful to the land or the people on it, well, I don't know what to think.

I pulled up and parked in a Visitors space and then stepped into the shadows to begin a perimeter of Marty's building. I had not, of course, announced my imminent arrival. It wasn't necessarily meant to be a pop quiz and I wasn't looking for some special reason to find Marty with his metaphorical pants around his ankles but I like to catch them when they're their real, natural selves. It gives me a better chance to decide what I think of them based on who they really are,

what they're really like. Marty had a lot going for him in that department, already, to be honest. He's not particularly social but he's got it together enough to maintain a lease on an apartment in a building full of mortals and not attract attention. That's good work, in my book. On the other hand, he doesn't seem like he's been a vampire more than fifteen years. It might just be that he's still in the habits of the living or this era has changed little enough in that time to suit him so that he doesn't stand out much yet.

There was a light on in his bedroom but nowhere else and I didn't hear any moans or screaming, which I counted as "so far, so good." I stepped up to one of the windows and tried to peek inside but he had the same full-window blinds most vampires use if they don't have a more permanent lair. If his senses were worth a damn he might hear me out there, too, though of course I'm as good at staying quiet as any of us, so they might balance each other out. The back porch – just slightly above ground level due to a weird dip in the landscaping, low wall, easily leapt in a hurry with zero risk of injury to one of us but high enough that a human would think twice about running straight for it – was tidy, one chair, one table, one ashtray with about a thousand cigarette butts sticking up out of it in a mounded heap. There was a book face down on the small table, smudges of ash half-wiped from the back cover. No dust jacket and lots of small print on the back so I lifted myself just slightly onto the exterior of the porch railing and leaned over to look at it: *Introduction to Statistics - Theory and Application*. It was a late-80's printing of a stat text book. So, no change there.

I went on around now to the front door and rapped slowly and distinctly with three even knocks. I could hear some music inside, muffled by the door – reinforced and I'd bet that was a homemade job that his apartment complex management didn't know about – and being played very softly to begin with so that even I didn't stand a chance of making out the words. A mortal never would have known it was playing in the first place.

After half a minute or so – we're good with the passage of time, at least in terms of measuring it – I saw the light coming through the peephole dim and heard a gasp, then heard a hand clap over the mouth that had gasped. I lifted one hand and waved and tried to smile. I'm no good at smiling. The peephole stayed dark, then light again, then the music stopped.

I stopped trying to smile and reached out to knock with another three simple raps, faster this time. The peephole flickered, like maybe he thought about putting his eye to it then decided against it. Everything was very quiet on the inside. I leaned against the door jam and put my face in the corner where the door opens.

"Marty," I said, so quiet that I knew he would be able to hear me but no one else would, "I believe you probably remember me. Withrow Surrect. I ask that you open the door, invite me into your home and allow us to spend a little time together."

Silence on the other side of the door, though after a moment I could hear breathing. So young. He still breathed out of habit.

"Marty," and now my voice was much quieter, "I can hear you. I know you can hear me."

More mostly-silence was his answer.

"Marty?" I cleared my throat and spoke even more quietly. I could hear his breathing get closer as he put his ear right to the door to hear me. "What's the square root of nineteen thousand eight hundred twenty four?"

The breathing stopped. After seven seconds, the locks started to turn. The knob turned. I stood back to show a little respect. The door cracked just a half-inch. "One hundred forty point seven nine seven seven two seven two five four three eight four three - "

I held up a hand and stopped him. "Good enough. I took another step back, then bowed very slightly at the waist. "Withrow Surrett. Is this the home of the one known as Marty Macintosh?"

Marty hesitated, still only looking at me with one eye before he stepped back, closed the door, undid the chain latch, opened it more widely and bowed from the waist. "I am Marty Macintosh," he stammered, nervous. "Withrow Surrett is welcome in my home."

I let the corners of my mouth tug upwards just slightly and then held out a hand for Marty to shake. He stared at it before doing so. "Good to see you again, Marty. Still on the counting thing, huh?"

"Five fingers on the one hand, five on the other," Marty said, watching our hands shake each other way past the point of politeness or custom. "Together they form two hands of ten fingers, turn-the-table asymmetry. They're the same hand, opposed."

I clapped him on the shoulder and sighed. Maybe Marty wasn't doing so well after all.

Eventually he got out of the way so I could walk inside. The place was dark but I could smell thick dust everywhere. Marty wasn't going out much. The dim light in his bedroom had a blue-white glow that made me think it was a television set left on but it didn't flicker. Maybe he'd paused a videotape or something. I had to wonder at Marty sitting around watching musicals on VHS with the volume down low but then I've read there are a lot of connections between mathematics and music theory. I couldn't play my way out of a wet paper sack so it's all Greek to me. Marty is one of the counters. You might've heard the old legend, though it's fairly obscure these days: throw down rice or sesame seeds or kernels of corn or whatever in a vampire's path when he's chasing you and he'll have to stop to count them before he can continue his pursuit, giving you time to get away. Marty is a counter. Numbers obsess counters. Sometimes it only takes them in spells, sometimes it's a specific kind of thing they can't resist counting, sometimes it's everything. I don't think it's anything special or supernatural. I think they're probably just people who had some latent obsessive-compulsive disorder or whatever and the trauma of getting turned made it come out, or made it worse, or whatever switch it happened to flip in relation to the disorder itself. Of course, I'm no psychologist, either, so maybe I'm full of horse shit. I dunno.

Marty's place, as I said, was dusty and didn't smell like it'd been aired out recently, but we

don't sweat or produce skin oils or the like, either, so it didn't smell like a human hovel, either. It just smelled closed up. There was dust I could see and smell on all the living room furniture except for one chair and it and the TV had been positioned to face one another. The rest was just for show. Hell, maybe the rest of the furniture came with the place. I looked around, sniffed the air, then pointed one thumb at the sliding glass door out onto the porch. "Smoke?"

"Sure," Marty said. He's a small guy, dark hair, pale skin – what they call "black Irish" though I'm given to understand that's not an OK term to use anymore – very thin and with great big eyes. He patted his pockets for a second. "Sorry the place is such a wreck. I didn't know you were coming."

"Just happened to be in town," I said easily, walking towards the door I'd indicated. "It's been a while, figured I'd say hello."

"Nineteen hundred twenty seven days, one hour, twelve minutes." Marty said it lightning fast, then closed his mouth and looked a little embarrassed. I raised both eyebrows and nodded.

"Like I said, a while." I opened the glass door, which wanted to stick halfway down its runner, so I gave it a hard yank and something made a bad noise and the door slid open. Marty looked slightly stricken and pointed at the far side of the door from the handle.

"My... that's my security lock."

I looked over my shoulder and saw what had made it stick – a bar of solid metal that had been laid in the track to keep the door from opening more than an inch or two. Wow. That's security?

"Well," I said with a more genuine smile than I'd had when I was still out front being looked at through the peep hole. "Guess I hardly know my own strength."

Marty swallowed – goddamn, so young – and nodded, tried to laugh. It sounded strangled. I walked on out onto the porch, settled my hips into the corner of the deck and lit a smoke. Marty followed me after a second and closed the door behind him, then tried to decide whether to sit or stand.

"Please," I said after a few moments, "Sit down if you want to sit down. This is just a friendly visit."

Marty nodded and perched on the edge of the resin chair, as anonymous as the apartment itself. He lit his cigarette with a hand that only shook slightly and pulled his arms tighter around himself, another very human sort of action but habit couldn't possibly make him feel cold. He was nervous. I decided to step lightly but with determination. I pointed at the twisted metal of the security bar and asked, "Much crime around here?"

"Twenty seven police calls in the last five years," he said automatically. Numbers helped to soothe him a little bit, and he sat back, finally lighting his cigarette. "Three break-ins, two automobile accidents, the rest pranks or mistaken calls."

I nodded. "A cat sets off the car alarm, that kind of thing?"

Marty nodded. "Seven times."

I smiled a little more. "So the bar is..."

"It makes me feel safe," Marty blurted out. "I get scared. I'm just..." He licked his lips, took a long drag, licked them again. "One."

I looked out across the back corner of the lot. There was a little creek back there that had run dry in the drought we'd experienced for the last, oh, decade; all the rain the night before had washed clean away over ground so hard and dry it might as well have been a concrete culvert. Climate change, you know. It takes a certain length of perspective and attention span to notice it happening, but it's happening. My breath had misted a little when I talked, at first, but now I was starting to leak heat all over the place in the chill November air and my breath was misting less and less. "There was a murder down in Hendersonville the other night," I commented. "Is crime getting worse around Asheville in general?"

Marty licked his lips again. He was so incredibly pale, even by our standards. He didn't feed enough, or at least hadn't recently. I wondered, if I opened his refrigerator would there be bags of blood or a couple of bottles of ancient condiments? "There have been thirty three murders in the greater Asheville region in the last five years, up from an average of twenty six every five from 1975 to 1995." Marty seemed to flinch a little when he said it.

"And were there any..." I paused, then went on. What the hell. "Any among anyone you know?"

Marty looked up briefly, nearly met my eyes, then didn't. "No."

I scratched my goatee briefly and wondered what about me had Marty so scared. He'd been like a nervous little rabbit the last time I'd been here, too, but not this bad. Might just be the passage of time, might be me. There's no better time to tell you this, I guess, but I'm a big guy. Not big in terms of muscled, I mean quite simply that I am a big, fat vampire. I weigh three hundred seventy six pounds and I'm not quite six feet tall. I guessed that might intimidate him but normally a fat guy like me doesn't scare anyone by making them think they'll get beat up; normally he scares them as an example of what might happen if they let that gym membership lapse. I decided to keep circling the crime, crimes in general, as long as that made him jumpy. I wasn't trying to torture him, but I could tell I'd started waiting for him to say something and I couldn't tell whether that was because some instinct registered that he had something he wanted to say or that I felt like there was something he wanted *not* to say. "What kinds of murders?"

"Twenty four shootings," he said after running his fingers against one another for a moment. "Five stabbings. Three strangulations or smothering deaths, one poisoning."

"Ah, yes," I sighed. "Guns are so easy. Everyone watches too much TV." I chuckled. "Poisons are so much classier, and a knife..." I drew a breath. My own had stopped misting entirely. It felt downright comfortable out here and it was at most forty five degrees. "Well, a knife says you mean it. You've got to get in close with a knife. Nasty work."

Marty shuddered just slightly.

"Other kinds of crime? Assaults?"

"Concentrated in specific areas, they're the most common crimes reported in Western North Carolina as a whole. If you do the numbers," here Marty's voice got a little stronger, "There are more assaults per capita than any other crime when counted in a two-mile radius from the center of any city or town of more than fifteen thousand people." His eyes flickered over and he spoke even more easily. "Outside that radius they're domestic violence. Assault by a stranger happens where there are sidewalks, mostly."

"And in rural areas, they happen at the hands of someone the victim knows?"

"Oh, yes, definitely. Almost always." Marty licked his lips again. I could hear his tongue rasp against them; they were dried, parched. He was starving. He locked himself away in his house behind a steel bar that would keep people out and watched movies and read crime reports and statistics texts and slowly starved himself half to death. For right then, though, what I knew was that I'd started to crack open his shell and I thought I had just a whiff of the scent of what he wanted to say but couldn't.

"And what's the most interesting kind of crime?" A nice, open-ended question. Let's see how he liked that, I thought.

Marty's eyes cut to one side and then the other but his head didn't move. There was no sound except the burning of tobacco and occasional road noise from out on US 25, reflected and scattered by trees and distance. I didn't say anything else, waiting, watching him fight something inside.

"Disappearances," he finally said. It sounded like it hurt; he panted a little when he said it.

"How do you mean?"

"They usually end up falling under domestic violence," he half-whispered. "In the last few years, though, they've picked up. People just vanish."

"Thin air?"

"Yeah." Marty was licking his lips between every other breath now. "They don't show up to work or they miss a meal or they forget to call mom on her birthday and that's what it takes for someone to notice that they just aren't *here* anymore."

"Where do those tend to happen?"

Marty struggled, staring at his own hand, then took a drag, then stared at his hand again. "Oh, you know," he mumbled. "Around."

I arched an eyebrow. "Around where?"

"Specific places."

"Such as?" I could feel the thread of meaning. It was right there. It was being woven in front of me. I couldn't tell what it meant but I could smell that a true answer to my question would be significant and Marty, having zero conscious knowledge of this, as far as I could tell, also knew his answer would be important.

"I could show you. I have maps. Google maps. Online Google maps." Words came out of him like wobbling birds in a gale, clustered and uncertain.

"Show me," I said, stubbing out my cigarette. He did the same and then got up and walked inside. I followed him. We walked down the "hallway," in scare quotes by virtue of its being three feet long, and into his bedroom. The blue-white glow was gone now, replaced by a red and green and yellow continuous fade-and-brighten cycle. It wasn't a TV with a paused movie, it was a computer monitor that had gone into screensaver mode. It was a *huge* computer monitor. There were stacks of printouts and file folders on the desk next to it, some in a big box made out of an upturned cardboard container lid labeled INCOMING and more in a matching homemade tray for OUTGOING. I flipped one open; it was a medical history.

"I do at-home records transcription," Marty said, whatever that was. "Doesn't have a schedule, no office, decent pay for what it requires. "I've done forty seven records tonight."

"Already?"

"I type really fast."

I nodded. I bet he did type really fast. He pressed some keys in rapid succession and the screen cleared to a desktop image of the moon high over a mountain somewhere, the picture engineered to make the moon bigger than she really is. Maybe it had been edited, I thought. People can do that, I've seen some of the Photoshop competitions online but I don't understand how or what they exactly do. I don't even own a camera.

Roderick has seven of them, and a little laptop computer he named "Toto."

Marty pressed a few more keys, clicked something with his mouse and a web browser opened. I do know what the internet is and I know there are web browsers and I have a computer at home in Raleigh that I can just barely get working enough to do some crosswords and some sudokus and I read a couple of blogs without ever commenting. I am a user, though, and I know that and am OK with that. I will never be a producer of the things people look at online.

Anyway, his browser came up and I figured he would type in an address, what's called an Earl for some reason, but instead he opened a bookmark. He liked disappearances enough to have them mapped and bookmarked for quick reference. Wow. On the other hand, maybe he has a bookmark for everything he's ever looked at online.

The map loaded and centered on Arden. That put Asheville slightly off-center, to the north, with Hendersonville and Rutherfordton and Brevard and Cullowhee and all the other little towns and sleepy villages of the mountains scattered in an uneven circle around it. There were clusters of red dots and he started scrolling the map around and zooming in here or there. "This is a custom app," he said by way of nonsense explanation. "I wrote it myself. Whenever I open it, it queries the case databases of all the law enforcement agencies around here and maps any missing persons reports such that the dot represents the last reported sighting of the person who's being sought." I nodded as though I understood, but in truth I only mostly understood. What I for sure understood was the "last reported sighting" part – and that there was no way Marty was having trouble adjusting to life fifteen years after he'd died.

On the map itself, there were little starbursts of dots here and there – one or two dots in Hendersonville, a handful in Asheville, a couple in the middle of nowhere, off on hiking trails and the like where every year a person or three take the wrong turn or go off the trail in the wrong place and then they're gone.

There was a huge cluster south of Brevard, not that incredibly far from where Clyde had been found. I leaned over Marty's shoulder and stared at the screen, then pointed at it. "Isn't that unusual?"

Marty sat in silence and said, "Want to watch a movie? I got some stuff off Bittorrent that's pretty good quality. There are these crazy guys in Sweden who have all kinds of bandwidth. You can get great speeds from them."

So Marty wanted me to see that starburst of dots south of Brevard and he didn't want to tell me why. A visit well worth having made, I told myself. "I'll take a rain check," I said. "Got some more folks to see. Listen, try to eat something. You don't look so good."

Marty shuddered. "Yes, sir."

"Please," I sighed, "Call me Withrow. And give me your number. I need to update my list."

Tooth and Nail – Chapter Four

We're twilight's parasites, with self-inflicted wounds.

--Depeche Mode, "Dead of Night"

I'd had Marty give me a print-out of the map. It was small and fuzzy and the greater visual acuity afforded me by the biology of the undead didn't really help any; it just made it easier for me to spot the flaws, the tiny gaps where the printer had skipped a beat trying to spit out the highly detailed imagery. I'd sat in the Firebird and studied it for a few minutes, Smiles panting happily and bumping his forehead against my shoulder every now and then to remind me to pet him, then folded it neatly and tucked it into the inside pocket of my trench coat. I turned on the heat in the car as I drove through Tournament Landing and back out to 25, turning south towards Hendersonville itself. At the last minute I turned back onto 280 rather than keep going in my original direction. It was stupid of me but I was drawn to check out Clyde's house. He had a son, I knew, and I had to wonder what shape the kid was in.

Well, I say kid. He had to be pushing fifty by now. A little weird in most places that he'd still live at home but up here, well, moving back in with mom and dad is a lot cheaper than paying for a rest home if they've gotten to need help. It's also a lot cheaper than having to get a real life. I'd heard a story on NPR one time about this trend developing in Italy. Mama-somethings, they're called there; guys who never cut the apron strings, never let go, no matter how hard their mothers push them. From what Clyde had told me in the ten hours we'd spent together in half as many decades, that was Cliff.

I coasted back past the airport and into Mills River and off onto North Mills River to go back into the woods, off a paved road, further back. When I was a half-mile or so from Clyde's house I stopped and pulled off onto the side where there was a gap in the trees and left the Firebird locked. Smiles clambered out the driver's side door behind me when I got out and I signaled him to stay quiet. He's an enormous Doberman and I feed him a little of my blood every few weeks to make him stronger and faster and maybe smarter than any other dog I know. He's not just well-trained, there's some connection between us so that he understands what I mean. I still did have to train him, mind you, but it took way better than it would with anything short of a seeing eye dog, maybe better. We walked a few dozen yards into the woods, away from the road, and then turned and made off up the hill before us. Even at three seventy five I can go through the woods without making a sound. I am a vampire, after all.

Clyde's house was on the opposite face of the hill we were climbing, so that I'd come up to

it from behind, through the trees, invisible to just about anybody and anything. I'd killed the heater halfway here; I'd only turned it on for Smiles' benefit, anyway. I hadn't taken him in when I went to see Marty because people tend to react badly if they aren't used to him and he gets really, really curious when he's in a strange place. I was gambling that tonight there wouldn't be any issues with that. I could keep him in check if I had to and I was half sure there wouldn't be anybody at the house anyway. His dad had just turned up dead. Cliff – Clyde's son – was at best staying somewhere with friends or family and at worst in police custody.

We crested the hill and I stopped Smiles with a fingertip on the back of his neck. We both stood there and listened, me turning my head this way and that to see if one ear could hear more than the other, him with his huge parabolic ears twitching back and forth, eyes scanning, nose down to snuffle from time to time. In the twenty minutes I'd driven without the heater on, I'd given back off a lot of that body heat. I figured that thermal vision wouldn't show much and night goggles like those military guys have in the movies wouldn't show a damned thing with me all done up in black like I was. My skin is pale, but my bulk was hidden. Anyway, what were the odds anyone would have night vision goggles up here in the sticks?

As the coast seemed to be clear, I moved us around to the left, away from the big-ass night light on the other side of the house, so that we were where the yard was drenched in the house's own shadow. There was only one light on and I'd have bet money it was a single lamp on a timer. There was a car in the carport on the lit side but it was a little station wagon that I figured to be Clyde's wife's car. I thought for a moment about Sarah having dropped dead of a cardiac arrest like that and then shook it off. *Happens to everyone*, I thought. *Sooner or later*.

Me and Smiles crept forward and I peeked around the front corner to look at the road in front of Clyde's house. I didn't see anything at first but when I leaned back an inch I caught a glint of light where I hadn't expected one. That damned light in the yard contrasting as it did the shadows in which I stood, was screwing with my eyes' ability to penetrate the darkness so I had to focus on seeing and letting my eyes adjust to the total darkness of the gravel road that ran below and in front of Clyde's front yard and on farther. With time I was able to make out the barest outline of the front driver's side quarter of a car. There wasn't chrome or trim where I might have spotted it, which was weird, but enough time passed that I could see that it had been darkened or covered up somehow. *Weird*, I thought. *Also, clever*. Someone was watching the house from a car they'd camouflaged for darkness. Probably the cops, I figured, and if they hadn't popped any sirens yet then they hadn't seen me and that meant either they didn't have any fancy goggles or they weren't watching the back of the house. More thorough in some ways than I might have guessed – the camouflage and all – but not as thorough in others. I smelled a lot of study and not a lot of experience in that. Interesting.

Smiles was standing at attention with his butt pressed against the back of my legs, keeping an eye out behind us, but moved with me when I moved back around to the rear of the house and crept up to the door out of the kitchen and onto a patio. I was going to stand out like

an ink stain on the Sunday tablecloth when I stepped up there, but I had to see the place for myself for some reason. *No time like the present*, I told myself, and I stepped onto the patio and right up to the back door and peeked in the window. Lamp light spilled in from the front of the house but the kitchen was dark. There was a coffee cup out on the table, left there probably from when Clyde was getting ready to come see me. I could see the world that very nearly was – the one in which he was still alive and this was still a normal visit – sitting right there with that coffee cup. The world's a funny old place and it only gets funnier the more of it you see.

I'd brought some cheap, thin gloves with me from the car – the kind that are supposed to be as warm as the thick ones but never are – and so I put them on and very gently tried the knob on the back door. It wasn't locked. Typical country living. The vampires have security bars on the sliding glass doors of their apartments and the mortals leave the doors unlocked.

I opened the door, slipped through with Smiles on my heels and closed it after us in one smooth motion. Woods, back doors, vampires are good at all that kind of stuff. It's what we do. With a gesture I directed Smiles towards the front hall where he sat down by the front door, head up, alert, and started sniffing the air. I turned down the hallway – a real hallway in this real house, as compared to Marty's abomination of neutral colors and cheap carpet – and slid past a guest bedroom, the master bedroom and towards a final door which had been turned into an office at some point in the past. There was a desk with no computer, a telephone extension, a big, green-glassed desk lamp of the old school sitting on it, a paper blotter, a peel-off day-by-day calendar. There were no lights except what came in from outside, the yard light, but that was plenty for me. The calendar, I saw, featured pictures of puppies and inspirational Bible quotes; a product of Sarah's influence on Clyde as they'd gotten older, I guessed.

There was a small bookshelf covered in fairly clinical texts on police procedure and law and the like. There was a larger one that looked rough-made, unfinished, that had big ring binders on it with years on the spines. Clyde had kept around his case files, his notes, various tidbits about all the investigations he'd worked in forty years with the SBI. I clucked my tongue to myself and wondered how many vampires lurked unrecognized – or worse, recognized – on the pages in those binders. No time nor interest in thieving that night, though. There was something specific I was after, something I felt like would be the final nail in the coffin of whether Clyde's murder was tied to the one he'd investigated when we met again for the first time since I'd been turned that night fifty five years before.

There were some big plastic boxes, some older boxes of cardboard – banker's boxes, I think they're called, you've seen them before in the back of the closet of a parent or an uncle or aunt or grandparent who didn't buy a home safe and clung to all the paper detritus of a life lived in contractual debts.

The boxes had been rifled through so haphazardly that I thought for a moment that the place must have been burgled. That didn't make any sense, though. The rest of the house hadn't been turned upside down like these boxes had. Their contents were skewed or scattered hither

and yon on the floor. They were evidence boxes. Clyde kept a lot of things he shouldn't have. He'd said enough, when we stood around in that field every five years and got to the age when we'd just swap stories of the old days when he got done telling me how his life had gone and he'd stopped asking about mine, for me to know that. He kept evidence. Mementos. Little trinkets that served as memorabilia from a life spent tracking down people who'd done terrible things, desperate things, twisted things, and putting them away for those things. He'd gathered up all the little bits of whatever they'd left in their wake and tucked them away in boxes.

There was one of those things, in particular, that I wanted to see for myself.

Back on that first murder investigation, he'd told me the *next* time we saw one another in that field, five years after, he'd found and kept a little bracelet from the wrist of one of the victims. It had been on the wrist of the kid in that pair of victims, the rich orphan who'd made friends with the wrong "song chaser" stranger. It was a rough leather band with little teeth – baby teeth, some fangs from animals, alternating one after the other, in a ring down the center of the strip of leather. At either end of the string of teeth and once in the very middle there had been the head – just the head – of an old-fashioned, rough-hewn nail made of iron. It had a metal clasp to close it around the kid's wrist. It had been so weird, so out of place in that age of Detroit steel and scientific parenting and better living through electric appliances, that Clyde couldn't help taking a special interest in it. No fingerprints on it except the kid's and the old woman's, the other victim. Clyde had decided it held little enough relevance to the case that he could pocket it without damaging the investigation. He hadn't told me right after; he'd waited a few years until he'd been able to convince himself it really hadn't mattered one way or the other.

When he held it out I'd started to reach for it and dropped my hand at the last second. I didn't know what it was, but I didn't want to touch it. It was *wrong* somehow.

It seemed completely random to me at the time and I had decided to just trust my instincts now rather than try to over-think it. Something made me want to see if that bracelet was still there and so here I was. I started to despair at the odds of ever finding it amongst the half-dozen or so crates of junk from his other investigations and then started to worry that if I messed everything up I'd give away that someone had been there and then said, well, screw it. I'm here, they're messed up, how much worse can I make it? So I dug in with both gloved hands and started rifling. Over the next hour or so – disturbed only by my own shuffling of papers and the sound of Smiles' claws on the hardwoods as he patrolled the inside of the house – I ended up sorting everything more or less back into chronological order. I didn't put it all away neatly in the boxes or anything, but I did organize it enough to be able to tell where in the mess his earliest cases should be.

There was no bracelet.

I couldn't know if anything else was missing, of course, as I'd never seen any of it before, but I knew for certain that the bracelet was gone – and that Clyde had not been wearing it the

night he died, or at least not when I found his corpse – and yet, in the papers, I *had* found the note he'd shown me at the same time he showed me the bracelet. It had been taped to the underside of the bracelet, he told me. He'd removed it to read it and never put it back. It was written on old note paper, bright pink, as unnatural as anything in the world. The handwriting had been old-fashioned and scribbly, no punctuation, capitals kind of skewed or just archaic.

*When Sun is low and Moon is high
Cold on you and danger nigh
Drench in blood of what you fear
Wear on wrist or keep it near
It stops the danger keeps you whole
It helps dear Jesus save your soul*

You don't get folk magic like that these days. That's some seriously old-fashioned stuff right there.

So, the note was still here. Whoever took the bracelet hadn't known enough to know it was important or they knew enough not to need the note to tell them the deal. I didn't really know anything other than the obvious, that this was some sort of charm bracelet against a specific danger. Clyde had pointed out to me what my eyes and nose had already told me: not a drop of blood on it. He'd known he was in danger, or been convinced enough to wear it, but either hadn't had time or hadn't been sufficiently convinced to actually dip it in the blood of whatever he was afraid of.

Or what he feared was well enough specialized that he hadn't had any of its blood close to hand.

I clucked my tongue again and then clicked my cheeks quietly. Smiles came into the room making less noise than his own shadow under a full moon and I held out the note. He sniffed it idly and then licked my hand. Nothing special or tell-tale that I'd failed to notice, I guessed. Nobody had disturbed us in the hour or so we'd been there, either, *and* I'd managed to confirm that the bracelet was gone. All in all, a successful night so far. I got up off my hands and knees and we crept around to the back door, let ourselves out and disappeared into the woods without anyone the wiser.

Tooth and Nail – Chapter Five

What's that coming over the hill? Is it a monster?

--The Automatic Automatic, "Monster"

Roderick Surrett had spent a few productive minutes with a phone book and three different online maps, a satellite imagery site and Withrow's backlog of newspapers and figured out that he could probably find Clyde Wilfred's house with his eyes closed after he'd studied them all enough. Then, as soon as the sun was down, he'd gone and found it and parked his car in the driveway of a house where a cheerful "Gone to Florida, back in six months!" had been taped to the side of the newspaper box and found a perch twenty feet up an ancient oak fifty yards away and across the road from Clyde Wilfred's home within an hour of sunset.

Cousin Withrow hadn't wanted his help, he could tell that, which simply made offering it all the more fun.

He'd watched with mild interest and then amusement as a small, black Cavalier with permanent plates – a government car of some sort – had pulled up the long gravel road, gone past the house, turned around in a driveway, killed its lights and then crept painfully slowly back to park a little ways up from Clyde Wilfred's home. The driver – an Asian woman, stocky build, hair slightly longer than shoulder length, dark pants and a dark coat and a dark cap and dark gloves and dark expression – had gotten out and carefully applied electrician's tape to all the trim on the car.

Fascinating. Roderick had watched with the keen eyes of a predator and admired her ingenuity. It's that kind of creativity he so often found lacking in humanity. It's what made them such boringly easy prey.

The driver had gotten back in and settled into her seat, pulled out a dark blue blanket that looked grey in the starlight and put it over herself to stay warm. Roderick had worn a light jacket to blend in if he ran into anyone but he loved being cold. Cold was so... refreshing. The human world was one of light and warmth and he wanted frigid darkness. He had stayed extra still, up in the tree, so that all the unnecessary, cloying warmth could flow out and into the air and away, shed like a snake's skin. He hated that warmth when he was out at night on his own, watching, hunting. Warmth was for luring them, putting them at ease. Cold was much, much more comfortable.

The woman had pulled out special binoculars – night vision, so interesting, more creativity! - and used them to watch the house for a while. Steam from her coffee made the windows want

to fog up so she had to crack the windows every now and then and let it cool off again. It must be torturing her, he thought, a part of her so warm and a part of her so cold.

He settled against the tree trunk and watched her. He'd planned to watch the house in case anyone came sneaking around – in case Withrow came sneaking around – but she was here and so much more interesting than some empty old house in some empty old town. She had a purpose. That always got his interest. She would yawn, nod off for an average of two minutes at a time, wake with a start, jerk the binoculars up to her face, look intently at the house, then drink more coffee, then repeat. It was soothing to lose himself in her cycle of sleep and rushed, self-conscious activity. It was like watching a human day on fast forward.

Eventually, he realized, he wouldn't be able to resist. He would have to go speak to her. He wished he had brought Doggie – his dog – to this place with him, but he hated making him fly. He was so very old now. He wasn't frail, but it didn't seem fair to make him fly. The dog would have been a great excuse to be out, though. Oh well, it's not against the law to take a walk after dark. He would just be out for a walk. Yes, humans did that. They walked all the time. They loved to take little walks. *It's good for their heart*, Roderick thought, and he smiled. If he thought about it hard enough, he could make his heart beat. He'd gotten very good at that kind of thing. He could even remember to breathe for ten minutes straight if he focused.

Slipping around to the far side of the tree from the fascinating police person in the fascinating car, he climbed down in darkness and made his way through the trees to way back up the road, far from the car, far behind it. He zipped up his jacket and rubbed his hands together to make them warm again. He reached up and ran his fingers through his long, blond hair, stringy, greasy, no matter how he washed it or how much product he used. He rubbed his sunken eyes and slapped his own jutting cheekbones, his hollow cheeks, to try to make them look a little more lived in. Then, whistling a happy tune, he set off at a leisurely pace down the middle of the road towards the so very interesting little car with the little woman in it.

H'Diane had a warrant to search the house and had gone through and done so - very carefully - so she wasn't sure why she was staking the place out. Oh, there were reasons enough. The victim's son was nowhere to be found. There were cops with pictures of him up in their break rooms and all over their email statewide. The newspaper had run a picture of him. There weren't many places he could hide. If it was a slow weekend for news then MSNBC or somebody might turn up asking questions. H'Diane shook her head, shook herself more awake. There was a theory professed publicly that such attention was a good thing in an investigation: spread the word as far as possible and you make it that much more likely that someone who knows something will call someone who needs to know it. Truth was, they hated it when reporters turned up and made the latest Missing White Woman story a media event. Spectating seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the real investigation. Lots and lots of volunteers would turn up to help search the woods for the missing campers but they weren't trained, they didn't know what to look

for. They'd just trample the undergrowth for a few square miles and then call it a mystery and that would be that.

Detective H'Diane Bing realized abruptly that she'd started to doze again. She hadn't gotten any sleep worth a damn the night before. She was nodding off in the car and completely screwing up the surveillance. She might as well go home. She could park a deputy out here if she wanted to, she had no good reason to do it herself. The son hadn't turned up at work for two days, hadn't been spotted anywhere else. She would get paged in a heartbeat if they found him somewhere.

Except that she cared so very much; it was her first case as a detective. She had all these entrenched deputies and LaVonde, with all her years writing and now editing the political beat in Asheville, and she felt like everyone knew what to do and she didn't. She had walked out of a career as a competent beat cop when she took down the chief in her last job. Oh well. She'd sworn to uphold the law, no matter who broke it. It wasn't her fault he'd been a murderer. In lots of departments that would never, ever be held against her. In some, it was a black mark that would never wash away. She could hear her father now: *I didn't bring you to this country so that you could throw away a good future*, he'd said. What had kept her in police work at all was the next thing he said: *But I didn't bring you here so that you could go against your principles, either*. That was all it took. She'd applied for detective training the next day and started night classes at UNC-Asheville in Criminal Justice.

Damn. Nodded off again. She poured more coffee out of the thermos and into the cup, drank some, set it haphazardly on the dashboard of the car, fished around in her lunchbox for a protein bar. She nearly dropped it when she heard gravel crunch behind the car. Glancing in the mirror she saw a stringy-haired white kid in a black leather coat, hands in the pockets, walking this way. Too young to be Clyde, Jr., she knew right away. He met her eyes in the mirror and then smiled a little and began to whistle a tune.

LaVonde stayed late at the office that night. She'd dug out those first few articles about the killing Clyde Wilfred had investigated, the one that happened where his own body had been found, but they had just scratched the surface. There were people who still talked about it online to this day, she'd learned. Most of them were conspiracy nuts, the usual assortment of John Birch Society types who think the commies killed a rich kid as an example to capitalists everywhere, the ones who were convinced it was Bigfoot and said the tears at their throats had proven it. Hell, she'd even read one very clinical and... well, "rational" wasn't the right word for it, but it was certainly written in the moderated, even tone of someone merely discussing the evidence with an open mind; anyway, some guy named Marty had posted a theory in a local discussion board in which he proposed that it was a vampire. What she was looking for, though, she kept seeming to circle without exactly finding it: there was no one around anymore, no one at all, who was related to the victims or had known them when they were alive. Every now and then she'd find a story -

a blog post, a discussion board entry, whatever - where someone explained that they were third cousins to the guy whose daughter babysat for the sister of one of them but never anything closer than that.

That was odd, she had to admit. People were usually eager to associate themselves with tragedy, no matter how tenuous the bond. She'd have expected someone to have *something* a little closer than that, surely? Someone who was, themselves, the cousin of the victim? Something? Anything?

Nothing.

Roderick walked around the car staying no less than ten feet from the driver's door. The woman inside, the police woman, watched him with an expression of relief. He'd startled her. Tsk. He had not wanted to frighten her. He wanted to *talk*. This was not a good beginning. He smiled politely, she smiled back, he kept walking. Ten feet past the car, he stopped and turned in a precise circle on his heels, as though his feet were attached to a pole that had been driven into the ground and he could just turn in an even circle like that.

"Do you need anything?" He perked up his eyebrows, his eyes, kept the polite smile. He was addressing her in the helpful, alert, friendly manner of waiters in nice restaurants. He remembered restaurants. They smelled bad, now.

The woman wrinkled her eyebrows. She hadn't understood him. He'd spoken too quietly. Roderick drew a slow breath to refill his lungs and then said, more loudly, "I'm sorry, but do you need anything? Is your car broken down?"

H'Diane opened her mouth, held it that way for a moment and then laughed suddenly. "No, I'm fine. Thanks."

Roderick positively beamed at her. She was a vision of joy. Look, she *talked*. To *him*. He hadn't been so excited in at least five minutes. "Just enjoying the evening?"

The woman held her mouth open again, looked around and past him at the house, then back to Roderick. "Yes. Out for a walk?"

Roderick lifted his elbows away from his sides as though to hold his arms out but didn't remove his hands from his pockets. "Apparently!" He chuckled. She chuckled. "A little chilly, but I prefer it that way."

"Yes," the woman said in agreement. She held up the mug of steaming coffee and gestured with it, took another drink. "It's going to stay that way for a few days, they say?"

Roderick heard the sweep of heavy fabrics in the back yard of the house she was watching and then the latch of a door being released. He stepped forward, back towards the car, blocking the view. "Indeed? And which 'they?'"

The woman blinked at him. "The... weather 'they.'"

Roderick did take his hands out of his packets then and clap them together. "Oh, yes, of course," he replied. "I meant..." He paused. "Well, whatever." Without a moment's hesitation he

turned halfway and looked back at Clyde's house, over his right shoulder. "Pity about that, isn't it?"

H'Diane coughed and cleared her throat. "Yes, it's tragic. Did you know him?"

Roderick looked back finally and then took two more steps towards her. He was thin as a knife but H'Diane found her view off the house blocked entirely, regardless. "Heavens no," he finally said. "I'm visiting relatives. I'm in from out of town."

"Ah," H'Diane said. "I should have recognized that the accent is different."

"As is yours," Roderick said. She could only see his silhouette but his cheeks were pointed in a way that made her assume he was smiling.

"I didn't grow up here," she said. "Well, I mostly did. Parents didn't, though. I never really picked it up. Hard enough knowing two languages, didn't need three." She chuckled at him and so he laughed in return.

"So do you know who did it?"

H'Diane sighed heavily, very suddenly, like something had escaped from under pressure and come blowing out of her lungs in its escape. "No comment," she said. "And no reporters in general." She scowled now, and reached for the ignition as though to leave.

"Oh, no, no," Roderick quickly said, and in a step he closed the gap so that he was leaning on the front fender of her car where it met the seal of the door. Her eyes jumped to where his hips touched that metal joint and then back up. "I'm no reporter," he added. "Just a concerned citizen." He smiled again. Standing sideways as he was, H'Diane could see the right half of his face, more or less, by the street light. *Funny how a big old night light like that turns everything blue*, she thought. He smelled strongly of soap and shampoo and cigarettes and absolutely nothing else. Something about it made the hair on her neck stand up. "So is this where you wait for him to return to the scene of the crime?" The half-expression on his half-face might have been mockery or amusement or simple salacious voyeurism.

H'Diane sighed so quietly that only Roderick could possibly have ever heard her. "No. Besides, this isn't the scene of the crime."

Roderick arched one eyebrow at her - well, at least one, she couldn't see both - and then smiled. "I read in the paper that you don't know where it happened."

H'Diane closed her mouth and said nothing. She'd had about enough of all this. Just taking a walk her ass. She should cuff him right now just to see what he coughed up down at the station. She started to say something to him, started to reach for the car door, when he produced another winner.

"Let's say you never find whoever did it?" His voice had dropped half an octave and he'd cut the volume by a lot. It was distressingly intimate to hear him like that. He drummed the tips of four fingers and a thumb on the roof of her car, idly, and looked back at the house. "How long until the case is closed? Like, how long do you look before you just say, oh well, we'll never know? I ask because I read that the man who was killed had a case like that as one of his very

first and I can't help wondering what that must be like." He sighed quietly. "That would really, really stink."

H'Diane started to tense just a little thought about starting to slide a hand towards her pepper spray, but then the guy just shrugged it all off. "Oh well. You'll find him. Or her. It could always be he had a woman on the side." His voice was just as bright as it had been at first, his body no longer some close, cloying presence right against the door of her county car but once again just some skinny blond guy in a biker jacket. Sort of. It was to biker jackets what those new Beetles are to a SuperBug: a yuppie impersonation to one person's eye, a stylish update to another's. "Anyway, you should probably go back to doing what you were doing and I should stop interrupting." He leaned down a little, waved with the fingers of one hand, then turned neatly and went whistling off back the direction he'd come from originally. Two minutes later, H'Diane stopped gripping the wheel and allowed herself to look in the mirror.

He was gone. *Must be a bend in the road back there*, she thought to herself. *There simply must be.*

She sat in perfect silence for three or four more minutes, eyes rotating between the rear view and side mirrors and the road in front of her. The house could take care of itself for a little bit. Finally she convinced herself that the freak in the jacket was well and truly gone. Ten minutes later she'd fallen asleep in the driver's seat and wouldn't wake up for nearly two hours. She would hate herself for the lapse in discipline but her body would be incredibly grateful. She would never hear Roderick Surret, back in his tree and humming lullabies to himself.

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Six

What once moved living organs leaks through a thin veneer.

--The Faint, "Posed to Death"

I was careful and quiet going out of Clyde's place - out the back door, straight through the yard, into the trees, over the hill and back down to my car. I backed out of where I'd stashed it and went on back down to North Mills River, then over and back onto 280 and south towards Hendersonville. A few hundred yards ahead I had to decide: 280 forked so that 191 went south to Hendersonville proper and 280 turned west, towards Brevard. I thought of Marty Macintosh and his map of disappearances around Brevard and I kept going on NC 280.

The newspaper said Clyde, Jr., worked in Brevard. He was a security guard at some old film plant that had shut down a few years back. Not much of it left, I imagined, but they paid someone to keep an eye on it all the same. The cops hadn't been able to find him but I still wanted to see it for myself. I wanted to go there and see if I could tell when he'd been there. If he was dead, too, this was something weird and tragic but not really anything *scary*. Mass murderers, serial killers, revenge killing, all that stuff is pretty low-rent in my world. If he was still alive, though, I had some questions for him; first among them would be, where's the bracelet?

I shook my head and let my mind wander while I drove the four lane highway around twists and curves and up and down gentle hills. The only place the road really got interesting was at the border of Transylvania County - I'm not making that up - when it rode hard up a high mountain and then swept fast down the far side into Pisgah Forest. At that bottom of the steep descent it ran through a little neighborhood that had grown up around the highway when it was two lanes and as quiet as could be. When the road had been widened they had just cut it into people's yards. Front porches and mailboxes were perched just feet - sometimes it looked more like inches - from the slow lane on either side. Someone in the past had put houses here to take advantage of the only straight shot to Asheville and the road had nearly knocked their houses over in thanks.

I swung a left onto 64, still two lanes here, past the fish camp and a barbecue joint and then very abruptly I was back in the middle of nowhere. More turns, more two-lane roads, and I had arrived at an intersection in the middle of nowhere. An old country garage was on one corner of it and a sign pointed to the right that read, "Clarke Industries." Wow. A sign for the plant and everything. What the hell, right? I pulled off at the garage, though, to look over that printout

Marty had given me. I was in the very thick of the disappearances Marty had noted over the last five years. Great.

I turned towards the plant and immediately had to start climbing. The car dropped into a lower gear and I put my foot to the floor and started to climb. Gravity and the steep grade were not my friends on this one and I'd dropped to thirty five, then to thirty, before I'd made it around the first couple of curves. The engine roared and I juiced it into passing gear to try to get some licks in of my own against them both. Eventually the grade got a little kinder and I was able to build some speed and relax a little. Here and there a house dotted the side of the road but never less than a half mile from one another and never very far from the road. This was the middle of nowhere - the plant bordered on and had once owned what's now an enormous land preserve owned by the state. I wondered at first why anyone would huddle their house so close to the road and then wondered again why anyone would come this far out to build a home in the first place, with all these trees and mountains and yards at thirty degree slopes to make them feel alone and uncertain.

Wouldn't make a bad place for a vampire, though.

I kept going and going and wondered if the mountain was ever going to stop, if I would eventually just burst through the clouds and find myself driving all the way to the moon, when I rounded another curve I saw another sign for Clarke Industries with "Ahead 1/2 Mile" at the bottom. Thinking back, Clarke had always been up here. They're one of those big international conglomerates that make stuff that never has their name on it - they make the chemicals that go into things rather than the things themselves, or they make highly specialized components, that kind of thing. This plant, they'd made film. It was one of their few commercial products. Of course, business had dried up in the age of digital cameras - computer-aided imaging, I'd seen it called in a newspaper story when the plant closed down - and so this place had been boarded up.

A minute later I saw the sign sitting at the mouth of an innocuous little road that turned left and disappeared into trees. There were the rusted, overgrown remains of a softball pitch in a field opposite the road. After I turned into the drive of Clarke Industries I noticed that one side of the drive was solid woods but the other was an enormous field. I slowed a little, the moonlight reflecting weirdly on the field, and paying more attention I could see that it wasn't a field, it was a drained lake. A couple of small docks and a pier made of planks jutted up out of the dried mud field where the lake had once been like jagged teeth in a beggar's mouth. I had a ways to go on this driveway and by the time I'd gotten to the plant I'd passed the moldering remains of a Clarke Industries Employee Credit Union and some tennis courts and what looked like carved wooden signs for an exercise trail back into the thick woods on the left and off gods know where. I'd read one time that the whole property covered 35,000 acres. Amazing, in this day and age.

There were no cars in the parking lot. I pulled up across a couple of spaces right at the gate house and rolled down my windows. I sniffed the air and at first I didn't smell anything much. I started to think driving this far out of my way was kind of a stupid idea, wasting time

when I could be talking to vampires I knew existed, but then I caught it.

The whiff of predator, the tell-tale scent of a fellow hunter.

I sat very still and breathed deep and even. The night was clear, the moon approaching full but not there yet. There were lights on in the parking lot but only a couple and right where I was. *That wasn't very smart*, I thought to myself. I should have parked in one of the darker corners.

A vampire rarely forgets a scent. It was very faint, very far away, but I could smell it and I'd smelled it before. It was the scent of the predator who'd been at that crime scene Clyde had investigated fifty-five years before. Well, no time like the present to make an introduction.

I climbed out of the car, left it unlocked behind me, crossed to the door of the gate house. The plant itself was surrounded by a high chain-link fence with barbed wire at the top. It was rusted but a glance in either direction told me it seemed to be whole. There was no light on in the gate house but I figured it was worth checking to see if it was locked before I bothered climbing over and winding up with a torn coat. The gate house was a small, brick building with large windows overlooking the parking lot and the drive into the plant. The plant itself was a series of connected buildings that rose like a ziggurat on the hill that rose behind it. I took it all in for a few moments – nobody had taken any shots at me on the way in or while I sat in the car sniffing the air so I figured I needn't skitter and hide – and out of curiosity pulled out my phone and checked for signal. Much to my surprise, three bars. Huh. Progress marches forward, even in these old hills.

Finally I steeled myself and pulled on the handle of the door into the gatehouse. I couldn't tell whether or not I was surprised when it opened with a tug. I stepped inside and listened, heard nothing, saw nothing. I kept walking through a little waiting room; the magazines were ten years out of date, dust was everywhere a guest would have sat and nowhere a guard would be stationed. I kept going and pushed open the door directly opposite the entrance. That left me on a once-manicured lawn that stretched up a slight incline between the gate house and the plant itself. The grass was overgrown, the shrubs out of shape, grass growing through cracks in the cement walkway. I stepped quietly but easily up the hill and at the top found three entrances, one to either side and one farther back. A rusted metal sign indicated CLERICAL to the left, CHEMICAL to the right, PRODUCTION straight ahead.

If I were going to hide out in a plant, I thought to myself, I sure wouldn't pick the secretarial wing and I wouldn't want to be around a bunch of chemicals I didn't understand and lab equipment, gas burners, that kind of thing. A big, cavernous factory floor, as I imagined it, seemed the best choice. So, on I went, straight ahead. The double doors into the production facility had cracked glass on the left side but were also unlocked. Bingo.

The building itself seemed to be mostly hallways in rectangles defining the inner perimeter of the building. Offices, storage closets, that kind of thing were littered around the outside. The inside was utilitarian and sparse, gray- and green-painted walls of cement blocks, hard tile that

would have rung like a gong when anyone else walked on it but I was able to stay mostly quiet. I glided along, noting doors for dressing rooms – they'd made them wear workers' uniforms when the plant was in production – and signs for a cafeteria. I listened at the door for the men's locker room, didn't hear anything. I kept going, up some stairs, following signs, more or less wandering. My nose eventually picked up something and with concentration I could nail it down as ham.

Cafeteria, then.

I kept going, slowing down and creeping so slowly that I didn't make a sound, even on the tile floor. The signs for the cafeteria and the scent I'd picked up led me to a pair of double doors with small windows of shatter-proof, reinforced glass set in them. I was mostly in shadow, out in the hall, and the cafeteria was mostly lit, so I risked a peek through the bottom corner of one of them and if I hadn't seen Clyde dead with my own eyes I'd swear he'd gained fifty pounds and was sitting inside eating a ham sandwich from a gas station and a bag of chips. He was sitting there chewing slowly, staring at his food, eyes a little glassy. Sweat stood out all over his forehead.

Now, I had a fairly simple decision before me: waltz in and do the nonchalant conversationalist thing, bust in like hellfire or keep walking. I was standing there trying to judge the best approach from his expression - a little stony, a little nervous, a little like an injured person going into shock, a little of the deer in headlights thing, a little woeful resignation - when I caught that scent again. The way I figured it, the vampire was either stalking Clyde or protecting him. This would be some delicate work, and I am absolute shit at delicate work. So, I stood up, adjusted my coat, straightened my shirt a little, grabbed the door handle and ripped the door off its hinges and threw it straight across the hall, against the wall, where it shattered one of the cement blocks and splintered to pieces, the reinforced glass spraying in eighteen hundred directions on narrow vectors of noise.

I barged through the door, arms pumping at my sides, the rubber of my boots clomping against the tile floor. Clyde jerked his head up, mouth open, and stared as I strode into the cafeteria, threw a table out of my way one-handed and walked right up to stand across his own table from him.

"Hi," I said. "Let's get straight to the important part. Are you being protected?"

Clyde blinked his eyes at me, very slowly. His jaw didn't work, apparently, for all it hung there like a detached sole. I leaned down and snapped my fingers in his face. He jerked back a couple of inches but otherwise just kept staring.

"I asked a question," I growled. "Let's hear an answer."

"Guh..."

I reached out and gripped Clyde's jaw in my hand. You know that scene in *Better Off Dead* when Ricky's mom grabs the French girl by the jaw and says, "Frieeeeeeeeeeeeeeends?" I was holding his jaw just like that and I worked it up and down a couple of times. "C'mon. Clyde,

Junior. I know who you are. I know why nobody's seen you around. Well, sort of know. I imagine you're in here hiding from the cops. Stashed the car somewhere and you just chill in here and wait for it to blow over, whatever it is. Thing is, you left the gate house unlocked. I just strolled right on in. Been in town all of two, three nights and I just find you like *that*." I snapped my fingers again. "So my guess is you're being protected. I mean, you could always be just as dumb as a sack of rocks, I reckon, but you're Clyde's kid and he was always a smart cookie so I'm guessing you've got some brains, too. So where is he? The one who's protecting you?"

Clyde was still slack-jawed. I looked around, sniffed the air, then leaned close and sniffed Clyde. I snuffled and snorted like a happy terrier, right up in his face and around his neck. I could smell the other vampire in the air but I couldn't tell if I smelled him *on* Junior here. Finally I let go of his face, reared back and slapped him across the left cheek just as hard as I could with the flat of my right hand. The blow sounded like a cap gun going off, bouncing off all that concrete and tile and metal chairs and metal tables and metal counters and fluorescent lighting. Finally Junior's chair came out from under him and he took three quick steps around it and back and reached for the chair to hold it in front of him on the floor, like that would stop me. At least it was a reaction.

"Alright," I sighed. I reached into my pockets and pulled out a cigarette, lit it, blew a big puff of smoke with frustrated impatience. "So where is he?"

"Who the hell are you?" Clyde was a fifty-four-year-old man who was carrying a big beer gut and had puffy cheeks and burlap bags under his eyes and a nose that spoke of years of drinking the cheap stuff. His hair was still mostly sandy-blond and I was a little surprised to see it neatly combed and matted in place with hair oil. Hair oil, in this day and age. I laughed a little, an abrupt chuckle, and he didn't at all know what to think of that and he clearly knew I found something about him just a little bit funny.

"Withrow Surrett," I answered him, voice quiet. "Your daddy ever mention me?"

Clyde flinched. He didn't blink, he didn't look away, he *flinched*, like I'd taken a swipe at him with a knife. Now, at what had he flinched?

"I asked you another question," I said. I tapped ash with exaggerated care into the middle of the floor. "Now that makes one I've been asked and in turn answered but two you've seen fit to ignore. That's not very polite."

"How did you know my father?" His voice shook a little and no other part of him moved.

"Went to high school with him," I said. I shrugged. Easy answer. That made two, though. I'd take it out of his hide to settle the score at this point.

"But you're..." He looked at me, up and down. "But you're half my age."

I flicked ash again and then waved the back of my hand at him like so much lint to get rid of before seeing someone important. "OK, so you're not being protected, in which case I shouldn't be here and neither should you. Let's make this easy; just look me in the eye and I'll make it all better." I started to gather up the will to work a little hoodoo and, for starters, wipe

his mind of any memory I'd ever been here, then send him on a nice little trip down to the police station. Vampires won't screw around with the cops if they've got any brains at all. I figured that was the safest place in the world for him.

"Who are you? You didn't know my father." Apparently he was still stuck back at the beginning of the conversation. I shoved the table aside with two fingertips and started towards him to grab his jaw again and do this the hard way.

"Could've saved us both a lot of time when I got here if you'd just passed me a questionnaire so I could have ignored it with some efficiency." I sighed and had my hand two inches from his face when the scent of the predator I'd been smelling the whole time washed over me like a wall and I withdrew from Clyde about three steps and chanced a look over my shoulder. A textbook Bubba was standing there in old coveralls and a flannel shirt, chewing a cigar with his hands in his pockets and one eye squinting at me. Crow's feet crowded his eyes and his hair was a thin and greasy jet black. He leaned against the door jam where I'd ripped it out of the wall. He was small, mostly round in the middle. He had a salt of the Earth look that probably made peoples eyes glide right over him if he ever went out in public. He looked like everyone's embarrassing redneck cousin.

"Alright," he drawled, "That's about enough of that."

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Seven

I know I had something to say; it lost its meaning and it faded away.

--The Automatic Automatic, "That's What She Said"

I turned around and looked the new guy up and down for long moments, then inhaled deep. I could see his own nostrils flair a little as I did so, which I took to be him smelling me out rather than being offended. I didn't much care one way or the other, though. This guy wasn't on Bob's old list. That meant he wasn't someone in the establishment. That meant I didn't give a good goddamn what he thought of me.

"And you are?"

The guy chomped his cigar for a moment and then stood up straight and put his hands at his side, bowed very slightly, mostly from the neck. "They call me the Transylvanian."

I snorted. No diplomacy or conscious insult, just a gut reaction. The Transylvanian. Classy. What I said, though, was a little nicer. "Withrow Surrett. I'm the boss in North Carolina. Came up the mountain to make some calls on people, see how they're doing. You're not on my list."

The Transylvanian smiled for just a moment and then nodded. "I've never cared much for the formalities, but good to meet you." He tucked one hand into the pocket of his coveralls, dingy and beige worker coveralls that had the Clarke Industries logo stitched over the heart.

Scavenger, I thought.

He didn't offer the other hand, just reached up and took the cigar out of his mouth, ashed it in a move I could choose to interpret as mimicking what I'd done a couple minutes earlier when I dismissed Junior as ignorant of his circumstance.

Junior was still standing there, quiet as a church on Saturday night. The two of them standing there like I was a turd on their lawn made my blood nearly boil but I kept my features composed. I took a slow, narrow breath and then made myself smile a little. "So. Why *weren't* you on Bob's list?"

The Transylvanian took two steps into the room and reached down to get a chair off the floor, then sat in it with one work boot propped on the opposite leg's knee, casual as could be. "Couldn't stand Bob. Surprised he lasted this long, to be honest. Always been the kind to keep to myself anyway." He shrugged half-heartedly. "So what brings you here if you didn't know I existed?"

I picked up a chair of my own and straddled it, my back to Junior. This was a conversation

for grown-ups, not him. I chucked a thumb at him over my shoulder. "None of his business, is it? Just ours."

"Clyde," the Transylvanian drawled after a moment's consideration, "'Bout time for your rounds, ain't it?"

Junior tried to say something immediately, got strangled, cleared his throat, then cleared it again. "Sure. Hit me on the radio if you need anything." I could just see a little plastic-coated wire sticking out of one of the side pockets on the coveralls. The two of them were right at home, weren't they? Then, Junior gathered up his lunch, tossed it in the trash and walked out the doors on the far side of the cafeteria without looking back.

I glanced sideways to watch him go, then looked back at the Transylvanian. "Which Bob did you hate? There were three of them that I know of."

He arched an eyebrow at that, then smacked his lips. "All of 'em, then, most likely. The one I met was back in, oh..." He thought, counted on his fingers, then looked at a wall calendar that was out of date. "1911, I reckon. However long that's been."

Alright. So, old. Not ancient by any stretch, but older than me. I smiled a little and settled my gut against the back of the chair I'd straddled. "Well I put an end to the last one myself. Got tired of being told how to live. Figured I'd do a better job of keeping the peace but staying out of people's personal business." I shrugged. "I'll leave the details to the imagination but the plan worked and here I am."

I didn't tell him how I'd killed Bob. It had been ugly and brutal. I'd left a leech named Sarah in charge in Greensboro after that in return for her helping me. We'd ambushed his car, killed his men, nailed him down with suppressing fire and burned him and his Lincoln Mark III to the ground at a deserted exit on Interstate 40. The last time I'd looked at Bob he was a pile of bubbling fat and a skeleton that was dissolving into ash before my eyes. Sarah had looked me right in the eye after that, shaken my hand, smiled a pretty smile and started barking orders at her people. She's like that, will kill a man with you and then act like she's just had one of the best nights of cocktails and light hors d'oeuvres she's seen all season, then flounce out the door and get on her motorcycle and ride away into the night without a helmet. I admire many of her mental qualities but she is pretty seriously messed up.

All that passed through my mind in a flash of memories and then I took another breath to speak again. "So what's your story?"

"I keep to myself," he said simply. Another shrug. "I don't bother nobody and nobody bothers me. Nice and easy."

I pointed around for a moment. "This place is going to get torn down sooner or later. How long you been here?"

"Long time." The Transylvanian looked around the room, too, then back at me. "They won't tear it down as long as I'm here."

"What drew you to the place?"

He smiled a little, relit his cigar – it had gone out somewhere along the way – with a cheap lighter from a gas station. “It was a film plant. Do the math.”

I shrugged back at him. “Pretend I’m bad at math.”

“We’re on the third floor,” he said after he had the cigar going good. “Eight floors are above us. Those are where the choppers, the rollers and the rest of the lines are up there. Total darkness. Twenty-four seven. They ran this plant in pitch black for decades. Otherwise, the film gets exposed.” He smiled again. “Easy to hide, easy to sleep, easy to wake up, easy not to be seen or remembered or otherwise noticed at all.”

I hmped at him.

“So what the fuck were you doing out fifty-five years ago?”

He blinked.

I smiled. It was a good smile, with teeth in it.

The Transylvanian smiled up a grim little twist at the corners of his mouth and took a drag. I watched him closely. I could see, hear and smell the gears turning in his head. Gears of memory or gears of lies, now that I couldn't tell.

“One of my brief forays into the world,” he finally said. “There was a new vampire in town. He was hunting for the rest of us. He wasn't Bob, I knew that; Bob would call ahead.” He looked sidelong at me for a moment, then back at the hand that was holding the cigar. I don't bite on bait that cheap; all that minor dig told me was that I'd done something right. “There wasn't hardly anybody around in those days. This whole region was a lot less populated than it is now and there were fewer of us around to match. I went out looking, didn't find him but he knew someone was onto him. I think he cut his losses and ran or went to ground for the long haul.” The Transylvanian shrugged lazily. “Never heard from him since.”

I chewed my cheek for a minute, then lit another cigarette. “So you're saying the outsider – this song chaser guy – was a vamp looking to move into the area, found out he wasn't alone and decided to kill off his moneybag and the rest of the help and high-tail it elsewhere?”

He nodded. “That's how I figure it.”

I took a long drag. “How'd he find out you were looking for him?”

“Never knew,” The Transylvanian said simply. He lifted both hands as he said it, palms up, flat. “I was a lot younger then, barely eighty. It's easy to make mistakes at that age.”

“And if you spend all your time up here in a film plant, why'd you care that he was around? How'd you find out about him in the first place?”

He smiled a little again and said, “He was living out in the world, among people. He attracted attention. People gossiped. Talk is dangerous. That isn't how we work. My maker raised me up right: keep your head down, stay out of people's way, don't let yourself get tied up in their affairs. There are back roads that run from here to there, short cut, over the hills and down into Henderson County. People who worked here heard the stories going around about that

kid and his house guest. It wasn't that hard to figure it out from my perspective. The way I saw it, if he was out carrying on, living in a place where people are, he's asking for trouble. If he'd been under someone's thumb, had a maker to keep an eye on him, something, maybe that would be different. But we can't just let ourselves go out in the world and live there like there's nothing different about us." He smacked his lips a little, taking a puff from the nasty, cheap cigar. It smelled like something from the same gas station where he'd gotten the lighter. "By making people talk he endangered me. All of us. There's a simple solution to that: get rid of him. Scare him off, talk him down, whatever it takes. I don't know what it would have come to had I caught up to him, but that was my goal – take the bull by the horns and give him a talking to, one vampire to another. I figured he'd be more likely to listen to one of his own than anyone else. It was a vampire problem so a vampire had to take care of it."

"But you didn't take care of it," I said quietly.

"Well, I did, sort of." He shrugged again. "He left, two people turned up dead in a tragic but *never solved* murder. I figure he was probably just going to tap the kid for his cash and bail out anyway, eventually or worse."

"Worse?"

The Transylvanian looked at me like a child who'd asked the meaning of a curse word. "Turn the kid, overpopulate the area, make a vampire out of someone too well-known and try to keep them around. Everybody knows rich people's business. That's why they noticed the kid's new friend in the first place, isn't it?" He laughed a hollow chuckle. "No, him killing off a couple bleeders and getting out of dodge because the pond wasn't big enough was the best possible outcome."

I nodded noncommittally and then sat in silence for a few moments. "So why protect Junior?" I gestured vaguely out into the factory somewhere. "What's the angle there?"

The Transylvanian sighed slightly. "If his daddy turned up dead in the same spot, I can only guess that vampire is back. If he's back, he's trying to send a signal: he won't be chased off this time. He's going to eliminate everyone who reminds him of that embarrassing incident from his past and Clyde Junior deserves better than that. I had an insight into what had happened and told him if he came here and stayed a while he'd be safe. Least I could do. He didn't have any ties to that vampire."

I glanced in the direction Clyde had walked, nodded with my head. "Unfortunately, as long as he's alive he's a suspect in the eyes of the mortal authorities. It doesn't really help us to keep him around, does it?"

Something flickered in the old man's eyes and his smile was gone. I filled the vacuum with one of my own. "Not that we should kill him. I'm just thinking out loud." With that, I stood. "I appreciate your time and your explanation. I've got a lot of rounds to make, though. This area may have been absent any vampires the last time you were out and about but times have changed and I've got a lot of social calls to make in very little time."

The Transylvanian didn't get up or offer to see me out. He just watched me, waiting to see if he could sense the gears in my own head. I didn't say goodbye or good night or good luck, I just walked out the gaping doorway I'd destroyed, trod heavily down the hall, down the stairs, out across that once-manicured front lawn, back through the gate house, out to my car and got in. I drove away at a leisurely pace, and the whole time all I could think was how much I hated being lied to by anyone, much less a country bumpkin like him.

Tooth and Nail – Chapter Eight

Their names are never spoken; the curse is never broken.

--Arcade Fire, "Black Mirror"

LaVonde had spent two extremely unproductive days at work. A couple of stories had slipped through that would probably generate snippy letters from readers upset at the eternally slipping standards of copy-editing and et cetera, et cetera. She didn't much give a damn. Well, OK, she did give a damn. That's why she'd given people assignments everywhere but Henderson and Transylvania Counties; she wanted that territory to herself for a few days. It wouldn't do, if she was going to look into a case related to another case in which she had a conflict of interest – and there were no two ways about that, she knew that herself and simply could not deny it – to run into one of her own reporters at a gas station in the middle of nowhere, a long way from the office.

The thing that had gotten her so interested was this thing that H'Diane had barely even commented on when she'd prodded her a little over dinner the night before: this mysterious outsider from the case fifty-five years before. She went over the details again: shows up in town, claims to be a song chaser, hooks up with a rich orphan and a completely out-of-place old lady from the next county over, goes out into the woods and the locals turn up dead. The outsider is never seen again. Something about that stuck between her teeth and she'd worried it for hours that night as she remoted into the *Citizen-Times* archives and sat reading story after story, rehash after rehash. She'd spent a while on a genealogy website with the old woman's obituary, sketchy though it had been, open in another tab. Vital records being a closed matter in North Carolina so she couldn't just go look up for herself whether she had any family left. It was up to her and the obsessive-compulsive habits of family historians everywhere. Ah, well; this was why they called it *investigative* journalism, she told herself.

Eventually she'd turned up the existence at the time of the old woman's death of a cousin who lived in Asheville. From there she'd gotten that the cousin had a daughter who was getting on into late middle-age but seemed to still be alive. There was an entry in the Google telephone lookup for her, and a street address out in Flat Rock, and she'd sat there with the phone in her hand the next morning, looking at the number, trying to decide what to do when finally she decided it would be better to just show up. The cousin was probably going to be reluctant to talk about this – every story anyone had written talked about how there was no one left to claim or remember the old woman or otherwise explain what she was doing there – and LaVonde just had

to hope that this cousin, a Mary Beth Harvey *nee* Ramsey, would be less likely to slam a door on someone than to hang up the phone.

East Flat Rock was, once upon a time, farm land and tiny communities of interrelated families. It had morphed into prime retirement real estate. New housing developments went up all over the mountains. The *Citizen-Times* had done a story on water use and erosion and all the other impacts of heavy, sudden development that had managed to piss a lot of people off. She wasn't involved, but she remembered the mix of people the story described: long-time families who saw the land as theirs and themselves as victims of an invasion and transplanted retirees who saw the locals as bumpkin mouth-breathers with no interest except freezing time in place to reclaim a pastoral history that didn't exist.

LaVonde drove through it, admiring the old forest, the old homes, the bed and breakfast places, the trailer parks, the signs proclaiming the availability of homes *STARTING IN THE LOW \$300,000'S* according to their over-sized text. She clucked her tongue. White people with white houses on a white patch of clear-cut earth. She would never, ever understand.

Five miles past the Carl Sandburg Estate she turned left onto a gravel track with a state sign – bent, rusting – that read MERRY LANE. *I doubt it*, she couldn't help thinking. She slid her Subaru past a few brick box houses and past a clearing and then at the very end she found an old, white clapboard house more or less in good repair with an ancient screen on the door. There was a newish station wagon of domestic make, fairly small and fairly fuel-efficient, sitting in the driveway. Fresh gravel marked a second place for a car. LaVonde pulled into it, checked her face and hair in the mirror behind the visor, got out, walked up onto the porch.

Mary Beth Harvey was standing behind the screen, wrapped in an old bathrobe. "Come on in, girl," she said heavily. "Too cold to leave the door hanging wide."

They made their way in. LaVonde noted a house that had clearly been home to generations of one side or another of this family. There were knick-knacks in every corner, immaculately clean, portraits of Mary Beth and a dark-skinned, smiling man LaVonde took to be the husband. Mary Beth had warned LaVonde they would have to talk while he was in town at a job site. They'd have an hour, maybe two. LaVonde would have to leave by three in the afternoon. *He don't know that side of my family*, Mary Beth had said. Whether that meant they weren't acquainted or that he didn't know something about them, LaVonde had been left wondering. She guessed the latter.

They sat in the kitchen. LaVonde remarked on the spotlessness of it. Mary Beth eschewed any compliments, saying it was the best she could do, no more, certainly no less. They chatted for a few minutes about LaVonde's work. She showed Mary Beth the badge she wore to get into the building every morning. Eventually Mary Beth seemed to relax a little. The instant coffee did something to wake up LaVonde's curiosity and finally she got right down to brass tacks:

"So, it was your aunt who was murdered fifty-five years ago?"

Mary Beth fell silent, looked at her hands, at the coffee cup in them, then back at LaVonde. "Actually she was my cousin," Mary Beth drawled. "But my sisters, they were older, they called her 'Aunt Ginny.' She was named Virginia."

"Virginia Ramsey," LaVonde said, and she reached for her notebook.

"I'd rather you didn't write this down," Mary Beth said softly.

LaVonde had heard that a million times, so she nodded and smiled a little. She didn't need to take notes, her memory was top-notch and she didn't plan on quoting anything Mary Beth said in any story; she was here purely on her own recognizance. It had merely been a test, and now she knew that it was the latter – there was something about her cousin/aunt that Mary Beth's husband didn't know and Mary Beth would just as soon keep secret.

"Do you know what she was doing out there?"

Mary Beth pursed her lips and shook her head. "None of us ever knew. She was a real secretive person. She never told much about what was going on in her own life."

"Do you know if she knew the other victim?" LaVonde started to say the name, then made a little show of checking her notebook for a moment. "Phillip English?"

Mary Beth shook her head a little and sighed. "I doubt Aunt Ginny knew him. She didn't have much occasion to be around rich people like him."

"What did she do for a living?"

Mary Beth sought around for a moment. "This and that. Took care of babies. Birthed them for some folks who liked..." Mary Beth cleared her throat. "People who wanted something more traditional."

"Mid-wifing?"

Mary Beth nodded and the ghost of a smile appeared at her mouth.

"And you? Do you do any mid-wifing?"

Mary Beth turned a shade paler, and LaVonde smiled back. "Is it a tradition in your family?"

Mary Beth looked away. "Kind of."

LaVonde nodded, cleared her throat, sat there in silence for a few moments, then *really* opened with both barrels. "Was Aunt Ginny a witch-woman?"

Mary Beth arched one eyebrow in stark... something. LaVonde started to classify it as disapproval and after two seconds decided it was more like... defense. "What makes you ask that?"

LaVonde laced her fingers together in her lap. "Phillip English had been seen in the weeks prior to his death in the company of a guy from out of town, said he was a professor from a college up north somewhere and that he was here as a song-chaser. Are you familiar with them?"

LaVonde smiled and nodded. "I had some kin who were recorded, way back, 1930's. Part of the New Deal, they said. They got paid to sing the old songs, some spirituals, that kind of thing." Her nostrils flared briefly. "The reason it was talked about in my family is, see, the fellow

recording them wanted them to sing old slave songs and..." She laughed abruptly. "They told him no. Told him no so loud he left town." She smiled again, that same smile she'd had about mid-wifing.

LaVonde smiled back and nodded at her. "Well, here's what that makes me think: if he were legit, he'd have to have someone local to show him around, take him to the sorts of people and places where he could hear those old songs. By the 1950's, most of them were already faded around here. If he'd gone up to, say, Swain County? Sure, he could stumble around and find some shape-note singers and study them and get a real warm welcome as long as he behaved himself, but here? This far down the mountain you'd need someone who knew the place already. If your Aunt Ginny was a mid-wife or..." LaVonde licked her lips, smiled again, "What they called a witch-woman, she'd have that knowledge. Lots of people back then still kept a lot of older folk traditions. A woman who could deliver babies, take care of them, maybe..." LaVonde waved a hand vaguely. "Maybe cure warts, cure illness, set a bone and rehabilitate them when it knitted?" She pointed the end of the sentence up as a question, trailing off.

"A lot of people still keep those folk ways, Ms. Burke."

LaVonde stopped herself from looking surprised. She just smoothed her features over and said, quite neutrally, "I've heard that, but never had the privilege of meeting any of them myself."

"Privilege?" Mary Beth looked wary again, defensive again, something... else.

"Well," and LaVonde paused to let the gears spin. "Those arts are considered long-lost in most places. Seeing someone who still practiced them would be like getting to see a..." She took a sip of coffee. "A rare and beautiful antique that's still going strong."

Mary Beth sat back a little. "What, like Larry's furrow?"

LaVonde wrinkled her brow. "Furrow?"

Mary Beth chuckled a little, nodded her head in the direction of the back yard. "Larry's got a garden patch out back. We grow our own corn, beans, tomatoes, potatoes, all the vegetables the store will rob you for. We grew bell peppers one year when they were a dollar a piece at the store. That's good money-saving." LaVonde smiled, still not really following and Mary Beth chuckled. "Anyway, Larry's got this furrow - it's a big, old, iron furrow, like a little plow. You use it to run a shallow trench through plowed ground. It's good for corn, beans, lots of kinds of plants that go in a straight line from one another. A man can push it by himself. See, once upon a time we were told we'd get a mule, a plow and forty acres. Now, people around here weren't as bad as they could be in other places - this county voted 9 to 1 against secession, you know, and slavery was just about unheard of and there were a few free blacks living out here, in the country places, where no one had to see them and no one could much be bothered to hurt them - so Larry's great-grandad eventually got the furrow but neither the mule nor the forty acres. Larry still uses that same furrow. Parts of the big wheel on it are about worn down to paper, but it still works and he still uses it. You mean like that?"

LaVonde still had a curious expression on her face but nodded. "Yeah. Like that. People

kept the folk ways to make the fields produce, to keep the cows healthy, to make the children strong. Seeing that – like Larry's furrow – would be a privilege.”

Mary Beth smiled quietly and then sat all the way back in her chair, drained the last of her coffee. “Witch-women did all that, sure,” she said. “But that ain't all. What do you think people did before, say, Roe versus Wade?” Mary Beth smiled again. “What do you think they did when a baby was born the wrong color? What do you think they did when a baby was born the wrong sex?” Mary Beth clucked her tongue. “A witch-woman didn't just make things grow. Sometimes she made things go away. A lot of time that wa real nice work – finding a baby a good home when the mother knew the father would be liable to kill it and her, helping a difficult labor get through, explaining things to a girl who'd just her first time of the month. It wasn't all pretty or wholesome, though, Ms. Burke. Sometimes it was ugly.”

“Are you saying your Aunt Ginny was...” LaVonde had no idea how to finish the sentence.

“She fixed problems. That's what witch-women do. If a community is too stubborn or backwards or narrow-minded or full of itself to admit it's got problems, someone has to fix those problems when they happen anyway. You make a lot of friends doing that kind of work.”

“Not *all* friends, I'd guess.”

“No, not all friends.” Mary Beth smacked her lips, stood up to make another cup of coffee. LaVonde sat in silence as Mary Beth spooned more Folgers into her cup, took the still-hot kettle and poured water in, stirred, added a little milk from a paper carton.

“Is that soy milk?” LaVonde was more than slightly surprised to see what she thought of as a sure mark of yuppiedom in Mary Beth's personal Kitchen of the Ages.

Mary Beth turned around, stirring with the spoon she'd used before, then put the spoon back on its saucer by the stove. “It's good for women of a certain age,” she replied demurely. “Keeps us... active.”

LaVonde fought back the chortle, cleared her throat, smiled. “Okay. So, back to Aunt Ginny. Would Phillip English have hired her to fix a problem?”

Mary Beth shrugged a little. “Maybe. But if it was a problem big enough to make him drive all the way out to Pisgah Forest, where nobody would know him, and hire an old black witch-woman who could barely see the end of her own arm anymore, well...” Mary Beth took a sip of coffee, smiled. “It was a very bad problem.”

“Gotten the wrong girl pregnant?”

Mary Beth made a pffft noise of dismissal. “Rich people never needed for doctors to do their abortions, Ms. Burke.”

“So what was it?” LaVonde tried not to sound exhasperated, but she was. Mary Beth was dancing around something, flirting with it, in a way that annoyed LaVonde still even though she'd had a thousand interviews go the same way. That this wasn't for her, she realized abruptly, that it was for H'Diane, is what annoyed her. She wanted to solve this problem. She didn't want the woman she loved wandering around in the dark in the middle of a murder investigation.

"Something old, to go to such an old woman. Something no one saw anymore, or talked about, anyway. Something dangerous. Something that scared him so bad he couldn't tell anyone else but an old woman no one would ever believe." Mary Beth was staring at the coffee intently. LaVonde glanced over at it and couldn't see anything so special. It was like Mary Beth was staring at herself in the mirror, or something she'd never noticed until she caught it out of the corner of her eye in that mirror as she walked by. She seemed to sink into a quiet reverie, and finally, "Yes. Something old and dark. I've thought about that a lot, Ms. Burke, and every time I think on it, that's where I end up. He was scared of something old and terrible and he went to a witch-woman because he thought only a little magic could save him.

LaVonde knew the end of an interview when she heard it. Without any preamble she stood up and started gathering her things together. "I'd better go," she said, clumsy as she gathered her things. "It's been a while. Larry might be back soon."

Mary Beth looked at the clock – nothing even a little like an hour had passed, they both knew. She stood up, though, cup in her hand, and walked LaVonde to the door.

"Thanks for letting me talk to you about your aunt," LaVonde said from the porch. "Like I said, it's not for a story, it's just for me. Still, I appreciate it."

"You got a personal problem that needs solving, huh?" Mary Beth smiled kindly. "I know that look when I see it."

"Not me," LaVonde blurted out. "My..." She sighed. "Partner."

Mary Beth nodded, took a pull from the mug, smacked her lips again. "It's an old story," Mary Beth sighed. LaVonde thought she meant the story of the lover in trouble, but Mary Beth added, "But maybe it'll help you some. Feel free to come by again sometime if you need something. Just make sure to call first."

LaVonde stood there for a moment, nodded, and left. It was that simple. Nothing leapt out at her, Mary Beth didn't watch ominously from the front door of her home, nothing. She just drove back out of Flat Rock and through town and then on back to her home, and the whole way she wondered how on earth she could manage to work this into a conversation with H'Diane.

Tooth and Nail – Chapter Nine

It's not as if we have that long, no endless time to dream.

--JunkieXL & Robert Smith, "Perfect Blue Sky"

Roderick and I sat out on my back porch around three in the morning. I'd wound up spending most of the night just driving around, the night before. After my run-in with the Transylvanian I'd mostly just had to think about things. Finally I'd wound up at home in time to watch some infomercial about a roaster and call Roderick to ask him over the next night. I'd sat around watched more TV, still thinking. He'd pulled up around midnight, we'd gone out on the back porch and I'd told him all about the outsider, the Transylvanian, Clyde Junior. He'd listened with that weird little half-smile he has and then we'd sat in silence for an hour or so.

That's something vampires get very good at: just letting time pass, doing nothing much.

The back yard was in bad need of a mow. The guy I'd been sending PayPal to every month hadn't been out in October, figuring it would be so cold and so dry that it wouldn't need much. Grass, though, it doesn't pay much attention to the weather if you get the right breed to grow in these parts. Eventually it just decides it doesn't give a damn and it grows anyway. I'd have to send him an email and ask him to get over here sometime after I left. There wasn't much of a yard, though; mostly trees and woods and then forest. I could see the lights of a couple other houses, off through the woods, way off, but I doubted they noticed me. I tend to keep the place fairly dark when I'm around. I sat and listened to a little critter of some sort rustle around in the grass and the leaves. Might have been a squirrel, might have been a chipmunk, might have been a mouse. There was an owl in a tree somewhere about fifty yards off. It hooted every now and then and I wondered when it would make its way over for its meal.

Finally Roderick said, very softly, "It seems to me like there's one very obvious explanation."

I turned towards him, surprised my neck didn't creak like an old door hinge when I did it. I nodded, lit a cigarette, watched his face. His eyes were kind of glassy, kind of dreamy. He was staring at absolutely nothing and it amused him somehow.

"The Transylvanian is going to turn Junior. Soon, I would imagine. Otherwise, why kill off the family?" Roderick shrugged. "He sounds like the old-fashioned type, anyway. But that doesn't explain the deal with the English and Ramsey murders. I can come up with some way in which he sees killing Clyde and taking Junior as his own to be tying up the loose ends of that killing but it doesn't explain why he killed them in the first place or why he particularly cared that

Clyde investigated that murder for the FBI."

"SBI," I corrected quietly. "State."

Roderick fluttered a few fingers, still staring at that amusing nothing. "Whatever. So why does the Transylvanian – wicked name – why does he care so much?"

I shrugged and continued to sit back in my big, round, padded chair.

"And what about that charm?" Roderick's voice was so low it was nearly a whisper and his eyes widened a little at the mention of it. "What a fascinating little detail. I wonder if Junior took it?"

"He wasn't wearing it when I saw him." I tried to figure out what Roderick was staring at, maybe something I'd missed, maybe a seam in the screen mesh that enveloped the porch on its three exterior sides. I couldn't find anything to look at, myself.

"Maybe under his shirt?"

I shook my head. "The security guard uniform had short sleeves."

Roderick arched an eyebrow. "Fascinating."

"Nice, Mr. Spock."

He smiled at me without looking at me, a wicked little twist of his mouth. "I would love," he finally said, "to meet the other vampires in the area."

I snorted at him. "Why's that?"

"Well, Bob didn't have the Transylvanian in his notes, right?"

I nodded. Roderick still wasn't looking at me but he seemed to notice it, as he responded after:

"So either they don't know about him either – not likely if this guy's been here for nearly a century and goes out whenever he hears another vampire is around – or they're hiding him. Bob never found him *and none of them told Bob about him.*"

I blinked, and reached up to scratch my scraggly goatee and stubble. I hadn't shaved tonight, just stayed in and looked scruffy. Vampires get... well, we get locked in whatever state we were in when we were turned. Forever. I have to shave every night if I want to look decent because I didn't shave *that* night. Roderick woke up every night with bruises on his wrists from a pair of police handcuffs and a split nose. He heals fast – we're talking minutes here – but he has them again the next night, like clockwork. It makes me grateful all I have to do is shave. No electric shaver can take down a vampire's beard, I have to use an old blade and put some weight behind it, but if that's as bad as it'll ever get then that's just fine by me.

"You know," I said, "You've got a point there."

He finally turned and looked at me. One eye was slightly more dilated than the other, something I've seen him do when he's about to become unpredictable. "Does that mean I get to go?"

"No," I said, too fast. He started to twist up the corners of his mouth again in that wicked smile and I followed quickly on my own heels. "This is the first time I've been back since I came

around to introduce myself right after Bob went down. If I show up with a bunch of muscle, it'll look like I'm already in need of protection, already on the ropes. I want to finish cementing a sense of authority and control." I had one hand up in a placating gesture, palm flat, facing towards him, fingers together and pointing up. Roderick smiled slightly more widely in a way that made the vampire core get twisted up in a reaction I didn't wholly understand. I grimaced a little. "Seriously, no. This is my turf. Do me the favor of respecting my wishes."

"Your... *authority*?" Roderick's smile turned into a full, slow grin.

I frowned at him and huffed. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm not going to play that sort of stupid game with my own kin."

Roderick laughed sharp and high and fast. "I'm kidding, Cousin Withrow." He put both hands up. "I promise not to do anything you wouldn't do."

I frowned again. "No cryptic half-meanings," I growled.

He laughed again, clapped his hands together twice in sheer delight. "OK! OK." He laughed more. "I promise not to take anything upon myself that disrespects your..." He licked his lips, opened his mouth as if to start with a vowel, namely *au*, then closed his mouth for a moment, breathed again and said, "Wishes."

I hrmphed at him. He held out one finger. "Pinky swear."

Sometimes you just have to go with the flow, meet someone where they are rather than where you want them to be. Reluctantly I held out my own hand and our little fingers clasped one another. "Pinky swear," I said.

He smiled at me, batted his absurdly long eyelashes and then started staring at his pinky finger in silence. I lit another cigarette and pulled out a little electronic sudoku thing I'd picked up at a gas station the night before on the way home. It wasn't backlit but I could of course read it in the dark. I slotted numbers into their places on a four by four grid, working my way up in complexity until Roderick left two hours later. I didn't see him out, I just shook his hand and he went out the screen door on the porch. Smiles was there on the other side, licked his hand and swept past him to come lay down next to me. I heard Roderick's little rental car start up with a high whine and drive away. I went to bed early and lay there for forty five minutes waiting for the sun to come up. Vampires don't sleep, not real sleep. The day sleep isn't like nodding off; it's death. It's turning into a corpse while the sun lights the sky. That's mighty mystic, if you ask me, but there's no two ways about it and there's no pseudoscience in the world to explain it away. The sun came up and my eyes slammed shut and when I opened them again it was the next night, shortly before six in the evening.

The newspaper said the cops were still looking for Clyde Junior. One deputy had said he might be armed and dangerous but the detective working the case, some asian lady with a funny little H' in her name that I knew signified she was of Hmong descent, which meant her folks had been loyal to the US during the Vietnam War, anyway, she'd said he was simply a person of interest and that if he was seen by anyone they should call 911. "He might be wounded, sick, in

danger," she said. She was certain she would never see him again, or not alive, anyway. I could tell that from the way she spoke about him. "He might need our help, but that's our job. Certainly no one should try to be a vigilante or a hero."

I folded up the newspaper, watched Smiles finish his bowl of chow and then clicked my cheeks to get his attention so I could load him into the car and go pay some calls.

Tooth and Nail – Chapter Ten

You've got to make up your mind, and make it soon.

--The Cure, "Wrong Number"

The funny thing is, in all of Western North Carolina – everywhere west of Hickory, to be honest – I had two vampires left on my list. Bob had known of three vampires in this entire third of the state. Well, not a third. More like a quarter. Down East is pretty big territory. Still, this wasn't exactly one neighborhood or one city and all I had were a vampire in Black Mountain and a vampire in Waynesville. I couldn't believe there weren't any vampires in Asheville itself. It's a city of one hundred thousand people. That basically begs for at least one vampire in it, maybe a vampire and a well-trained spawn still learning the ropes. It was just big enough for the occasional slip-up without attracting much attention. I simply refused to believe there weren't any vampires there. If the vampires here were hiding The Transylvanian from Bob, it occurred to me, from whom might Bob have hidden vampires *he* knew about, but no one else? For that matter, given he'd come from a long line of Bobs, maybe his maker had hidden one from *him*. Or farther back than that, maybe. Maybe there was some ancient old vampire in the middle of town who was so good at hiding and so terrified of the modern world that no one knew he existed at all. Hell, he could live in the sewers if he needed to. Plenty of rats and other things down there to feed on when push came to shove.

I shuddered a little and Smiles picked up on the apprehension in my thoughts when I did so, whining briefly and then sticking his head up against the glass of the window on his side, watching out the side of the car.

Waynesville was slightly closer and so that's where I went first. The vampire on my list was one I hadn't managed to track down last time, no more than to leave her a message on her answering machine and, when I got back to Raleigh later, find one from her on mine in return. So, she'd been alive as of then. Just not very talkative. That's fine, I don't want them as friends, I want them to know I'm in charge. This time I'd done a little more leg-work ahead of time, though, and I had tracked down from Bob's other diaries that she worked in a rest home in Waynesville.

A rest home. How perfect. Tons of people laying around waiting to die and they get replaced all the time. She probably pulled down just enough money working the night shift, with a shift differential, to get by in almost total anonymity. I shuddered again. If someone had walked up and described that to me and asked my opinion I'd chuckle and say she sounded like

the perfect vampire – quiet, unobtrusive, surrounded by no one who would remember her – but arriving there on my own somehow made it horrible.

I pulled off the highway and drove through Waynesville – a one-horse town to beat the band, just a small Main Street strip and some houses perched on the sides of steep mountains and back roads – and eventually found the improbably named Shady Spot Assisted Living Estate. That was an ambitious and corny name, all at once, and I shook my head. Sometimes, I think, the universe needs a better editor. The place itself was an aging brick building, one story, tiny windows spaced evenly down its side with individual air conditioning units in each one to crowd out any light that might manage to get in. The yard was neatly kept and there were some benches and an abandoned croquet set outside. It looked weathered and forgotten. I doubted seriously that anyone in a joint like this was up for a game of croquet of an afternoon.

It was the tail end of visiting hours by now – nearly half past eight when I got there and the sign said *Guests Welcome From 8:00 A.M. To 9:00 P.M.* I didn't hurry, though. A place like this, some hole in the wall where people are sent when their families are too exhausted or strapped for cash, wasn't going to have a lot of staff or a lot of give-a-damn left in it.

I opened the white, wooden, heavy door in silence, stepped inside and stood there sniffing the air for a few seconds. I wrinkled my nose up hard; I could smell death, slow death, agonizing death. Some of them had started to decay around the edges and they weren't all the way dead yet. How she managed to work here was a question I couldn't imagine answering on my own. Maybe she got used to it. Maybe she thought it smelled good. I shuddered again. I'd left Smiles in the car and all of a sudden I wished I'd brought him inside. A great big Doberman might stand out in someone's memory, though, even one of the ones here. I steeled myself and sifted the smells until I caught that scent of vampire – clean, coppery smell, sharp as a knife – and I followed it down to a room at the end of the hall. There was a small sign on the wall with an arrow pointing that way that read QUIET WARD so I kept going at half-pace. As I passed each room, every door half-open, I saw people in what were clearly their last weeks, maybe days, maybe hours. Finally my nose led me to one room in particular and I stood in the opening, hands in my pockets.

Carla Van Buren looked to be fifty-ish. She had hair that was mostly gray but I could see the thick, dark brown it had been at some point in the past. She was tall and dumpy and looked very Nordic in terms of her frame. I figured she'd come by the name honestly. For all I knew, she was an original immigrant. I didn't have any idea how old she was.

She was folding sheets in one corner of this particular patient's room. The woman was as pale as one of those sheets and Carla was watching her with the intent gaze of a predator sizing up the prey. I wondered whether she'd fed from this woman and left her looking like that or whether she was mulling over feeding from her and finishing her off. I didn't see a lot in her harsh expression that made room for anything else. She had to have seen me, had probably smelled me before I'd gotten there, but she didn't look over. She just kept folding until the sheet

was sharp enough to slice through a two by four plank and then set it aside.

"She isn't going to make it through the night," she sighed. Her voice was very soft, out of place in a body that big. "I've called her family. I don't think they give a damn. She owns about two hundred acres a few miles that way. She pointed with a thumb to one side. "One of the day nurses, she told me the other night when I came in for my shift that the family had a team of surveyors out there last month. They can't wait to see her go." Carla nodded at the old woman. "They just want to sell to a developer and forget she existed."

I looked around. The room was tiny, neat but crumbling, like it seemed everything here had gotten to be in the last fifty years. "They must need the money."

Carla smirked at me and started folding another sheet. "So, I take it you're Withrow?"

I nodded at her, leaned my frame against the door jam. "I got your message last time. Thought I'd pay a visit while I'm in town."

"Thought you'd make sure I'm not shacked up with the mayor and the chief of police with a finger in every pie, you mean."

I shrugged at her, nonchalant. "Maybe," I said.

"Don't worry," she finally said with another heavy sigh. "I keep to myself."

I nodded at her, looked down at the floor, kicked the heel of one boot against the toe of the other. "That's all I need to know," I replied. "Just want to make sure everyone knows that though I'm in Raleigh I keep an eye out, keep an ear to the ground. If you have trouble, I'll help if I can. If you make trouble, I'll end it."

She fluttered her lips in a half laugh, half scoff sort of way. "Big bad city vampire come to tell me what to do?" She looked me up and down. "You couldn't find me in these parts if I didn't want you to. I don't need to be talked to like a kid, neither. I bet you were knee-high when I was hitting my Twilight."

I smiled a little, shrugged again, inspected a fingernail. "Maybe, maybe not."

"Maybe not," she said, and her eyes narrowed a little. "So how long are you going to be around?"

"A few days," I said casually. "Just got a couple more calls to make on folks, figured I'd spend a few days refamiliarizing myself with the area, then head back to Raleigh." I snapped my fingers and dug in my pocket, pulled out a little notebook and flipped to a shopping list. I mimed reading the words there, or consulting them. The page read: light bulbs, fabric softener, dark fabric detergent, vacuum cleaner bags, rawhide treats. What I said was, "By the way, there's one vampire around whose number I couldn't find in Bob's stuff, and for that matter I couldn't find a name, either. Somebody down in Asheville? Sounded old from Bob's notes but that's about all I've got."

Her eyes stayed narrow. "Could be anybody," she said.

I chuckled and scratched my right cheek. "Could be. Didn't get a chance to ask Bob himself, what with his being a puddle by the time I was done taking over. He might have had

more notes but I torched his place in a fit of impatience." I smiled benignly. "Anything you can tell me would of course be appreciated."

Carla went back to folding her sheet more intently, snapped it into place with quick hands, picked up another, stared at the dying woman in the bed. "Charles. Chucky, they call him. I hear he likes the bars in Asheville." She sneered a little. "City vampires."

I smiled politely. "Of course. I should've thought of that myself. What's he look like?"

She laughed. "I don't know. Haven't seen him myself. He could be anybody."

I raised both eyebrows. "Not much of one for social calls, eh?"

She snapped that sheet together and into place, too, and put her fists in her armpits, arms crossed. "No," she said. "That's not how I think we ought to work. We live our lives in quiet isolation, we don't make trouble, we pick a people and we stick with them, blend into them. Is that against the rules now?"

I laughed quietly. "No," I said. "Not at all. Quite the opposite."

A quiet buzzing came from somewhere in Carla's pockets and she pulled out a little pager thing and looked at the tiny screen pressed a button so that it went silent. "Mr. Wilson in 203 needs something."

I nodded, started to step out of the doorway to let her through but she moved to the old woman in the bed rather than towards the door. I arched an eyebrow and she looked cross. "A little privacy?"

I made a small O with my mouth and turned my back. I could hear, just at the edge of even my ears, the slicing of skin, suckling, then silence. I could hear the old woman die in her sleep. To be honest, it was a pretty peaceful way to go. It doesn't feel good to have someone bite open your neck and drain your blood, but if they do it on your right side you don't live long enough to feel much of anything. The brain starts to starve almost immediately. It isn't like holding your breath and your blood still pumping with whatever oxygen is still in it; the brain goes fast when the blood is cut off. A vampire who wants his prey to live has to bite on their left so the brain keeps getting blood while they gasp and flail and bleed.

I could hear Carla lick the wound closed – the only reason any of us are still a secret at all – and stand up and straighten her dress. When I turned back around she was using the old lady's mirror to check that there wasn't blood anywhere on her uniform. She looked back at me and I could smell... something. It smelled like lightning.

Now is probably where I should tell you something you don't know and a lot of us don't learn for a long time unless our makers are big into the education thing. Vampires have a thing we can do. It's called Last Breath. When we drain the life out of a human being, actually take their life from them by drinking, we absorb... something. I don't know if it's the soul, exactly, or an essence, some metaphysical whatsit left over from the person's living blood leaving their living body to sustain us; I don't know any of that shit. I don't think about it much. The point is, when

we do that – and the smart ones among us don't do that very often at all – we can do something special. It's different for all of us. If a vampire is very carefully raised up, so that they never kill, they never find out what that is. Their makers, if they're real careful, don't tell them it exists because then the kids would just want to do it as soon as possible to find out their super-secret power. Sometimes it's something useless, sometimes it's the ability to read minds, sometimes it's downright scary and magical. Like I said, unique for every one of us and no way to tell until we try it and see what manifests itself in our personal arsenal of abilities. I imagine there are vampires out there whose power is so obscure or useless or whatever that they never do find out what it is, no matter how many people they kill, because they don't have any reason to *try* boiling a kettle of water with their mind or turning electric blue on command. Others, of course, milk it for everything it's worth. Agatha – my maker – she can live, complete with heartbeat and a need to breathe and an appetite for real food, until the next sunrise.

Mine is, well, it's kind of cool and kind of lame. I can turn everything real dark, drown all the light in a place so that it's pitch black and I'm the only thing that can see. Kind of cool, right? Great party trick, if nothing else. On the other hand, it's so obviously unnatural that I don't see it as much of an advantage when it comes to hunting and such. Maybe if I could turn invisible then I'd use it more, but that would mean killing people and I can't quite bring myself to think it's OK to murder someone just to take a joy ride with sonar.

Carla, anyway, whatever her power was, it smelled like lightning just about to strike. I blinked at her and she looked back at me in the mirror and smiled a little, mysterious, secretive. Her pocket buzzed again and she mashed whatever button made the pager go silent without even taking it out of her pocket. "Don't worry, Mr. Wilson," she said to the air, "I'm coming, I'm coming." She swept past me and down the hall towards the other end of the building. I followed her, too curious to contain myself or act polite. I could hear Carla's pocket buzzing again and this time she didn't bother to turn it off, she just picked up the pace to a sort of half-trot. I took longer steps to keep up, walking heavily, boots ricocheting on the cheap old tile. It felt a lot like the inside of that dead factory where the Transylvanian lived, for just a moment, and I pushed those thoughts aside and half-ran myself to see which room was 203. She got there two steps ahead of me and shot through the door. I stopped in the doorway, a hand on either side of it, leaning forward a little. She walked in and the room brightened with her presence.

Mr. Wilson was a desperately old husk of a man with wispy white hairs on his head and a clean-shaven face twisted in agony. Both hands were on the buzzer and he had a death-grip on the call button. Carla's pocket was going crazy buzzing and I could see from the way his eyes bulged that Mr. Wilson was about to asphyxiate in the middle of a cardiac arrest. Carla had her back to me, then looked over her shoulder, smiled again and stepped around the bed so that it was between us and I could see.

She put one hand on Mr. Wilson's throat and another on his chest and light spilled out from between her fingers. Mr. Wilson let go of the buzzer all of a sudden and his face went slack and

he started breathing again in fast, shallow, ragged gasps. His eyelids fluttered and closed, and his whole body relaxed so that he was finally slack and sleeping with the call button laying askew on his hip.

“You can heal people?”

Carla didn't say anything, she just checked a couple of beeping machines next to Mr. Wilson, then walked back over to the door so that I got out of her way and she closed it behind her. “Tomorrow Mr. Wilson will call his lawyer,” she whispered. “He'll change his will so that I get seven percent instead of six.” She smiled softly. “He owns the development company that woman's family wants to sell to.” Her smile stayed as sweet as an angel's. “I'm giving him until I'm up to ten percent. Any longer than that and his family will start to wonder how the hell he's hung on so long.”

I said a polite goodbye and left as quickly as decorum would allow.

Tooth and Nail – Chapter Eleven

Have you ever had trouble with your automobile? Have you ever had to push push push push?

--Adam & the Ants, "Car Trouble"

"So she's a nurse who heals for money and profits?" Roderick's tone was casual but her eyes were wider than normal and the way he licked one corner of his lips over and over gave the lie to all that nonchalance. "Big deal, right? Welcome to commercialized medicine."

I had to smile a little. He had a point, sort of. "I still don't like it," I grumbled. "It's a little... I don't know, a little squicky."

"Squicky?"

I'd met up with him outside one of Asheville's low-rent nightclubs for college kids. If I'd had to guess, I'd say he'd been hunting. He likes the young ones. Emily tells me he very rarely does them any serious damage, so whatever. As long as he kept his nose clean, I didn't care. We all have to eat sometime.

"Squicky." I shrugged a little, tossed the cigarette butt onto the sidewalk as we neared the doors to his hotel. "It's a word, isn't it?"

"It's a *web* word," Roderick said with a smile. "You've been going online, haven't you?"

I shrugged again, tried to look like I didn't understand. "I've got an email account, yeah."

"Gmail?"

I looked away and down at my feet, coughed, cleared my throat. "No, why?"

Roderick shrugged in mimicry of me and grinned. "It's the best," he said, voice low, confiding this to me as a great secret. "I can send you an invite."

"I use PayPal!" I blurted out, then I I fluttered my lips and laughed. "Hey, you didn't happen to notice anyone... else in that bar, did you?"

Roderick wrinkled his brow at me and shook his head. "No. Anyone special?"

I sighed and waved a hand at nothing. "Maybe? Carla claimed there's one of us around who likes the bars, nightclubs, that kind of thing. Wasn't on Bob's list."

Roderick looked around theatrically, hand to his brow as though scanning a distant coast. "Last time I checked, Cousin Withrow, this was Asheville, NC. There aren't a lot of nightclubs. He can't be that hard to find."

I frowned but then I laughed anyway. "OK, you've got a point."

"Would you like me to... look for him?" Roderick waggled his eyebrows a little, excited at the thought of being let off the leash of guesthood for a while.

I opened my mouth for a moment, closed it, then said, "No, leave it to me. It's not that you aren't capable, it's that I need to be the one to find him. It's my state. I still can't afford to have anything but a personal contact. I want to establish myself in their minds first."

Roderick shrugged at me, that same mimicry, and smiled. "Your call, Cousin. Your call."

We were passing the reception desk – I was just going to see him up to his room and then go on to the last one on my list of known vampires – when he said that and the night clerk jerked her head up straight and said, "Oh, Mr. Surrett? Mr. Surrett?"

We both spun on a heel, but she was looking at Roderick. He smiled sweetly for her, as sweetly as he could with that hollow face and the unflattering fluorescent lights. "Yes?"

"I heard you say 'call,'" she explained, digging through some papers and finally producing a hot pink sticky-note. "It made me remember. You had a message earlier, while you were out."

Roderick crossed the distance to the desk in two long strides – she flinched slightly, it always freaks them out when we approach suddenly, even though they've long forgotten we exist – and took the note in one smooth movement. He looked at it, then crumpled it and stuffed it into a jacket pocket. "Thank you, dearest." His voice was sweet and smooth. She blushed profusely, then stammered and finally, after long seconds of Roderick staring at her from across the counter, put her head back down to look at some paperwork.

Roderick turned and stepped back over to me, smiling oddly, winking.

"Who called?" It wasn't my business but I asked anyway. I tried to sound casual.

"Emily," Roderick sighed with a flutter of eyelashes. "She's probably afraid that I hurt someone and I'll be in trouble with you. Tsk."

I hrmphed and then he laughed, so I laughed, and we climbed into the elevator.

"Who's next on the list, Cousin Withrow?"

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck with one fat hand. "Guy by the name of Blaine. Drives a tow-truck. It shouldn't be a big deal, I like the guy, good manners, keeps to himself. We met last time, this is mainly just a social call, make sure there's nothing he needs."

Roderick and I stepped out of the elevator and walked around the corner to the door of his room. "Well, do let me know if anything interesting comes up," he said, and we shook hands and I left. I had five hours until sunrise and a lot of driving ahead of me.

Blaine Simmons was young but not as young as Marty Macintosh. He'd been turned in the '70s, best I could guess. He drove a tow-truck at night for money. It was weird to me, the way the vampires up here didn't have money of their own when they were turned. Usually we turn folks who can take care of themselves, people who can disappear from the land of W-2's and become just another name on a piece of paper or in a database somewhere at the IRS without earning another paycheck the rest of their days. Roderick is luckier than I am in that regard but, like I said, my family did have money and it wasn't long after I'd been taken that I got every penny they had. In the mountains, though, they were all working stiffs, to use the vernacular.

That's a pun of which we're very conscious. We use it anyway.

Anyway, Blaine and I had met up briefly at a truck stop the far side of Old Fort Mountain the last time I'd been here. Our conversation had been brief but he'd been cooperative. He didn't care who was in charge down in Raleigh, he said, he'd keep his nose clean and let the politics sort themselves out. That's an attitude I can respect. I may have taken an active hand – a very active hand – in vampire politics in the last five years but before then I'd seen myself as part of Agatha's extended operation and the Bobs that ran the state could go to hell. I guess I really did believe that, come to think of it, since I personally sent the last one there.

Blaine and I were set to meet at the same truck stop and I'd gotten there twenty minutes early just because that's how things worked out. Given it was Blaine, I tried not to tell myself it was because I wanted to surprise him in case it was a trap, even though counting on a timely arrival in a specific spot was precisely how I'd gotten Bob. Old habits die hard, though, and vampires are creatures of habit.

I leaned on the hood of the Firebird for a while, checked my voicemail – service out here, I couldn't believe it – thought about calling Agatha and decided against it. Things up here were unusual and Carla Van Buren had certainly thrown me for a loop with her little display of abilities but I didn't need to go running straight to mama the first time I saw something I didn't expect. I paused and wondered whether Agatha were thinking of calling me, instead; sometimes it happens like that between maker and made, that sort of synchronicity about little things. Ah well. She'd call or she wouldn't.

Five minutes after he was supposed to be there, Blaine pulled in with his beat-up old tow truck. He cranked the window down and looked, as one might expect, exactly as he had before. "Got a call to go on," he said over the engine's loud rumble. "You'll have to ride with me."

"It'll be a crowded cab up there, with me and you and them, won't it?"

"Nah," he said, waving a hand and spitting tobacco juice onto the pavement. Normally drugs don't effect us, but like I said, creatures of habit. "Just a fix-a-flat gig. Triple A." I nodded, patted my pockets, checked that I'd locked the Firebird and then walked around and climbed – eventually – into the cab of his tow truck.

"You get a lot of the late night stuff?" I buckled my seatbelt – we're immortal, not impervious – and adjusted the strap and settled in.

"Enough," he said, and then he nodded. "Enough to keep me going."

"The Triple A stuff must pay well, I reckon."

He shrugged, waggled a hand up and down. "Good for what it is, usually, but it ain't as much as you'd think."

"Or as you'd want," I said, smiling a little. Blaine was a real down-to-earth vampire, real easy-going. It was easy to relax around him. Less money or more boredom and I could have wound up with a job like this. Of course, Agatha wouldn't have turned me if I had been. Whatever. "Right?"

He smiled and half-shrugged at me, steering by the enormous wheel those old trucks have. I could hear, deep down below us, the movements of an old-fashioned manual steering system, the thrumming of the gears as he shifted them, the mechanics of forward motion. "I figure out how to make ends meet," he said.

That stuck, for some reason, and I didn't know what to do with it. It just barely snagged at the edges of perception. It was a perfectly conversational comment, but I still had Carla Van Buren on the brain and somehow the tone he used suggested something hidden, something secretive. I didn't know what to do about that just yet, so I went with the suggestion of secrecy and said, "Say, I hear there's a guy in town not on Bob's old list. Likes the nightclubs."

"Nightclubs?"

"Asheville," I said. "Not Old Fort, but up in Asheville."

He thought about it, turning it over; I could see from his face that he was thinking about it, and then he shook his head. "News to me. I don't get up there much. Most of my calls are interstate calls or backroads around here."

I nodded; made enough sense, it wasn't like there weren't plenty of tow trucks in Asheville. Out here was where he'd have less competition, people so grateful they wouldn't think twice about a pale guy who smelled of gasoline – and only gasoline – showing up in the middle of the night to get them out of a fix. "Carla confirmed him for me but said she'd never met him, either."

Blaine blinked, slowly. "You talked to Carla?"

I shrugged a little. "Sure, gotta talk to everybody. That's what making rounds is all about."

He nodded, reached for a red plastic cup with a bunch of tissues stuffed inside and spit tobacco juice into it with a loud squelch. "Well, she may get into town more than I do."

I nodded, shrugged again. "Whatever, just curious. I'm sure I can turn him up. Not a lot of places around for him to hide, you know?"

Blaine smiled and laughed quietly. "True, true. Still, I'd be surprised if he gives a damn what you've got to say." He hurriedly glanced over. "No offense, of course, but it's a big state. Raleigh's a long way away. Lots of people up here would just as soon let Raleigh go to hell as be told what to do."

I thought about that and rubbed my goatee at him. "Fair enough," I said, "But somebody who screws around up here threatens all of us, everywhere, much less in Raleigh." I looked over and Blaine made a vague head bobble of possible agreement. "Besides, you know how it. Always someone in charge. Anywhere there's a heap, no matter how much shit is in it, some rat's going to scramble to the top. Might as well be somebody who respects your independence. I doubt Bob was all friendly-chatty when he came around."

Blaine smiled a little. "I never met Bob."

I arched one eyebrow. "Never met him? You were on his list, though."

"Oh, he knew of me, sure, but I never quite managed to meet with him." Blaine shrugged. "I was a lot busier back then."

I smiled a little, then frowned a little, then asked as I looked out the window on my side. "Business bad lately?"

"Naw," Blaine said. I could see him grinning in his reflection in the window. "I just didn't have anybody working for me then. These days, I go out pretty rarely. Special occasions, a shift every now and then to keep my hand in, but truth told, I've got six guys working for me."

I turned around halfway and blinked at him in silence. "Six guys work for you?"

He grinned wider. "I know, pretty good, eh? Easy money. Two guys on each weekend shift and one on each shift during the week. I just fill in on nights when somebody's sick." He coughed, quietly. "Not that they get sick often, if you catch my meaning."

I blinked again, this time very slowly, and worked very hard not to tighten my grip on the handle of the door. "You're... feeding them?" It's something we can do. It makes them strong. I do it to Smiles. We can do it to people, sure, but it makes them, well, different. It makes them all crazy in the long run.

"I'm careful, I'm careful," Blaine said with a dismissive wave of his hand and another squelch of tobacco juice. "Feel free to smoke in here, by the way." I rolled down the window a little, grateful for the blast of cold air that ran through my hair when I did. I lit a cigarette and started to pull on it hard, smoking fast. This wasn't like Blaine. Blaine kept his head down. Blaine stayed out of the way and people stayed out of his until they had a flat tire. He drove a beat up old truck from the '70s and ran solitary. "I know what you're thinking," he finally said. "That ain't Blaine, you're thinking. Well, times change. We have to change with them. I can't spend the rest of eternity out here on the highway, can I, all on my own? I had to start building up my base, setting myself up to disappear from the mortal world." He shrugged, as though all this simple eloquence were his natural way. "It's what we all have to do, especially these days. Facial recognition? Retina scans on driver's licenses? What if the government puts out a national ID card? Hard enough getting by on a Social Security number that's fifty years old as it is." He squelched into his cup again. "Just figured, you know, time to stop pretending I'm one of them." He waved his hand vaguely at the world outside the cabin of the truck. "I had to start being what I *am*."

We finally slowed, coming around a curve, and the conversation died abruptly. Blaine was scanning the side of the road, glancing at the odometer on his truck, then we saw him – a little Latino kid, maybe seventeen, standing by a hatchback with the the car halfway off the road, emergency flashers on. Blaine pulled up behind the car, put his own flashers on and then got down out of the truck. "Just be a minute," he called. I looked over the car – early '80s Datsun, from before they became Nissans. I was surprised the car had made it this far. The kid was struggling with English, I could just barely hear him speaking to Blaine and Blaine's feeble attempts to respond in Spanish. I actually speak it, so I thought about getting out to help, but

really – how many ways are there to tell someone, *See that flat tire?* The kid and Blaine walked around to the front passenger's side, Blaine came back for a big jack he had in the back, then he lifted the car up with it and started changing the tire with the speed of a very practiced hand. The kid got bored of watching him, turned his back and folded his arms over his chest to try and get warm in the cold night air while Blaine finished up the tire.

Eventually I got bored of watching, too, and started staring off into space, turning over in my head what Blaine had said about it being time for him to recede from mortal affairs and mortal attention. Getting a cut off of six different guys? Owning his own business? Not the Blaine I'd met five years ago at all. He was growing up, growing into his own as a vampire. I had to admire him. I have plenty of money, to be honest, but I still paint. That's what I did when I was alive, or was trying to do, anyway. At any rate, I still paint. I even sell one every now and again. It goes as a "found work." They think I'm my own grandson, raiding the attic to pay for what they doubtless consider a shiftless and hedonistic life. Oh well.

It was out of the corner of my eye that I saw Blaine move once he'd released all the hydraulic pressure on the jack and let the car sink back down softly. He simply turned, grabbed the kid around the chest and upper arms, from behind, and sank his fangs right into the kid's neck on the right side.

I sat up straight in my seat. That was twice in one night someone had let me watch them feed and normally we are, without going into too many details, solitary hunters. I stared, mouth open, ash finally falling off the end of my cigarette and into my lap. Blaine drank and drank – going in on the right like that, I knew he was going to kill the kid but it still made my guts squirm to watch it happen – but finally he pulled his head back and, I assume, licked the wound closed. The kid spun as he fell so that I could see his eyelids flutter and his eyes roll back. Blaine wiped his mouth on an oily rag he pulled from his back pocket, then walked over to the truck, opened the door and grinned at me. "Pardon the midnight snack but, y'know." He rummaged around behind his seat and came out with a little airplane bottle of liquor, checked the label, nodded to himself, then went back over to the kid. I saw him twist the top off and splash a little of the hooch over the kid's shirt and face, then pour the rest into his mouth and tilt his head back so it would go down his throat, then stood back up and chucked the little bottle out into the woods off the side of the road. I watched it fly in a lazy arc and disappear into the trees.

Blaine walked back, climbed into the truck and belched noisily. "Pardon me," he said.

I grimaced into my fist, not sure what the hell to say, and then said, as he put it in gear and started to back away from the car, "You know, I *don't* know."

"Know what?" Blaine belched again. It smelled... well, it smelled good. I had gone out the night before to kind of top off at a biker bar outside of town so I wasn't exactly hungry but, y'know, food's food.

"You said, 'Pardon the midnight snack, but you know.' Know what?" I lit another cigarette around the question and looked over at him with what I hoped to be a completely blank

expression.

Blaine wrinkled up his nose and mouth and waved a hand in the direction of the kid and his car. "You know. *Them*. Can't stand 'em in my territory."

"Them?" I knew what he meant and though it disgusted me it didn't particularly surprise me. Still, I was going to make him say it.

"Mexicans," he said, face still scrunched like the kid had tasted of crabapples.

"There's a Puerto Rican flag sticker on his car," I said, casual.

Blaine snorted at me. "Whatever. I don't like 'em in my domain."

I stopped myself from raising both eyebrows, so instead simply said, "Domain?"

"Well..." Blaine chuckled a little and tried to look sheepish but failed miserably. "It's all really your domain, I know, but still." He chuckled again, a little eheh-heh-heh, as fake as an aluminum Christmas tree. "I'm the one who lives here."

I sat in silence, debating whether to reach over and tear Blaine's heart out of his chest to make the point that, actually, it really is *my state* or to simply let it slide on the grounds that he's harmless. I couldn't decide, so I didn't produce any reaction, one way or the other. I just sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Blaine was headed back towards the truck stop – my little visit was over and he was showing me to the door – which started to infuriate me. I couldn't really express why in any conscious way at the time, though obviously I have some, well, let's just say I have some issues about territory and being in charge. I waited until we got back to my car. Blaine pulled into the parking lot of the truck stop, I undid my seatbelt, the truck came to a halt – for a moment I wondered if he expected me to just jump out as we went by and roll the rest of the way to the Firebird – and Blaine held out a hand to shake before I got out.

I reached over, took his hand, shook it politely and then ground the bones into dust between my fingers. Blaine started to scream but it came out strangled, his mouth open, his eyes bulging. His other hand started to go for the gun on the dash but I reached out and twisted it like a pipe cleaner. I was so furious that my fangs were out, my eyes dark. The lights in the parking lot flickered for a moment. I was really, incredibly, unbelievably angry.

His domain? This racist pipsqueak reject from the Cooter School of Tow Truck Driving?

I pulled him towards me by useless hands, which made the veins pop out on his neck. He wasn't looking at me, he was looking away, marshalling the pain into something more useful. I'd pulled a fast one by waiting until we were somewhere sort of almost public. He couldn't do a lot to fight back, not without attracting some serious attention.

"Whose territory is this?" I hissed it, very softly, an inch from his eyes.

He made a little noise in his throat and his arms twitched like he was going to try to fight me. I could feel bones start to mend between my fingers. I waited a second until there'd be something to break again, then broke them a second time. That produced a grunt and a long, high-pitched whine.

"I said," I whispered, "Whose territory is this?"

He simply grunted at me again. He could have spoken if he wanted to. He could have assuaged my ego by saying that it was mine and I'd have gotten out and he could have spent a few minutes mending those bones all over again and gone about his merry way, but he didn't.

"I intend," I said, voice still very soft, mouth – teeth – just an inch from his left eye, "To find that out. I intend to find each and every one of you, and I am going to make certain that everyone understands that this is *my* territory." I cleared my throat, drew a long, heavy breath. "I'm going to say that again," I whispered. "This is *my* territory. If it's inside North Carolina on the goddamn map, it is *mine*. Do you understand that?"

He started growling and the bones in his wrists were knitting faster this time, so I broke them yet again with the simple pressure of my thumb and index finger on the little bones where the hand meets the arm. I moved my thumb and forefinger just a little farther up his arm, very slowly, making sure to keep pressure on the breaks, and then snapped the larger bones that run from wrist to elbow in three different places on his left arm. He was pale and shaking and I'd swear that I could smell blood, probably blood-tears pooling in his eyes.

"Good night, Blaine." I said that in a normal voice and he spasmed in surprise at the sudden volume. "Do feel free to call if you need anything." I let go of his arms, opened the door of the truck, got out and shut the door behind me. When I got into the Firebird, backed it up and drove away, Blaine was still sitting in the truck, still shivering a little, teeth gritted, his hands out of sight.

The way I figured it, one of us would kill the other the next time we met.

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Twelve

Well I don't know, but I've been told you'll never die and you'll never grow old.

--Modest Mouse, "I Came as a Rat"

Roderick licked his lips, dry as they were in the winter breeze that blew continually on his balcony overlooking downtown Asheville. There wasn't a lot of downtown to be seen. Seattle was so much bigger, so much more. Asheville was a tiny little bowl of light surrounded by mountains. He could walk from one end of downtown to the other in less than an hour. It was so small. It seemed so alone.

It needed a friend who could really appreciate it.

Roderick smiled and licked his lips again, stringy hair blowing over his face and into his eyes so that he reached up with one skeletal, pale hand and pulled it away. "Hello, Asheville," he said to that bowl of light. "Would you like to play a game?"

The town didn't say anything in return, of course. A part of him was sad that it didn't. If he'd been in the right frame of mind, they might have had a whole conversation. *I should make some time to kill someone so that can happen*, he thought to himself. It was a happy little thought, a planning for the future, everything will work out in the end sort of thought. He liked those sorts of thoughts.

His phone rang, ruining the moment. He sighed, licked his lips, pulled the phone out of his jeans pocket. It was Agatha. Poor dear. She did worry so.

"Good eeeeeeeeeeeeeevening," Roderick purred into it when he opened it.

"Hello, Roderick."

"What occasions this pleasant surprise?" He turned around and leaned his back against the railing on the balcony so he could stare at his own reflection framed by the reflection of Asheville in the dark glass of the sliding door.

"Just checking in," Agatha sighed, quite friendly, quite casual. "You didn't return my call."

"I was having a bit of a rest first," Roderick said. He liked his reflection. He liked it a great deal. "I apologize if I worried you at all."

Agatha was quiet for a moment and the cadence of her voice was very precise when she spoke. "Not at all. I do want you to understand, however, that any member of my family simply must return my calls in a timely manner. I don't call without reason. That goes for adoptions, as well."

"Does my cousin promptly return your calls?"

Agatha chuckled lightly, as casual as morning dew. "Now, now. No prying."

Roderick smiled but said nothing. He just let the silence hang there until finally Agatha got down to business.

"Now," she eventually said, "What has Withrow uncovered?"

"Well, he might not be telling me everything." Roderick was unabashedly coy, curling up around the suggestion of half-truths lurking in some shadowy corners. "But, he seems to think the Transylvanian is hiding at least one vampire from him. I suspect he's going to start looking for those hidden vampires very soon."

"And you haven't given him any... help? Any little nudges in the right direction?" Agatha's voice was a little apprehensive and Roderick had to smile again at his own reflection when he heard it.

"None at all. He's bounced some ideas off me, we've brainstormed a little, but I haven't given him a moment's assistance. Should I?"

Agatha was quiet, then finally, "If he tasks you with something specific, yes, by all means. Still, I want to see how this plays out without direct intervention."

"Of course. You're the boss."

"Please, just call me Agatha."

"What does Cousin Withrow call you?"

Agatha was quiet again, then hung up. Roderick held the phone open until it went to sleep and he was in the dark again with his own reflection and the city lights behind him around his shoulders like a mantle, like a great cloak of stars. He hoped very much that Withrow would call him again soon.

H'Diane and LaVonde were sitting on the couch of their living room. Music was playing on the stereo, piped in from LaVonde's computer in the bedroom. They each had a pile of papers on and around them and in their hands. H'Diane was doing some reading on old cases, ones that had never been closed. She'd been desperate to get her head out of the Clyde Wilfred killing for five minutes. They'd watched the house, they'd put out bulletins, they'd run his picture on the news, they'd gone up there to that damned factory a million times, watched the road in and out, everything, and they hadn't turned up a thing. Clyde Wilfred, Junior, was nowhere to be found. That first forty eight hours of the investigation were long gone. The trail was cold. Hell, there wasn't a trail to have go cold in the first place. There was nothing. They didn't have a murder weapon, a motive, a suspect. Of course they were listing Clyde Junior as a "person of interest," which translated roughly as "the closest thing to a suspect we have at this time," but they didn't have anything like enough to press charges.

H'Diane had heard a couple of the deputies talking it over in the break room the other day and one of them had said what she'd already caught herself thinking: *that kid is dead in the woods somewhere, just like the rest of them, and we'll never know.* It wasn't going to look good for H'Diane if her first case as a detective went unsolved. Nobody had hated Clyde Wilfred for

letting his own biggest case go unsolved but that's because he'd already closed a few by the time that happened. H'Diane shook her head and tried to focus her thoughts on the old case files she'd brought home to get all this out of her head in the first place. She sipped her coffee, set one folder aside, opened a fresh one and started to read.

LaVonde, very casually, piped up from her side of the couch. "You know, I talked to the cousin of the woman in that old murder the other day."

H'Diane didn't really hear her, or at least didn't process it, at first. "Who's that?" Then she blinked and looked away from the papers in her hand and looked over. "Wait, what?"

"Virginia Ramsey. The old woman who was found out there off Green River Road back in the '50s." LaVonde barely even looked up, so thoroughly engrossed was she in the old clippings and printed microfiche articles she was reading.

H'Diane blinked again, then set the papers in her hand off to the side in a haphazard pile on the coffee table. "Why?"

LaVonde shrugged. "I just got curious. Looked her up."

H'Diane looked incredulous. "Curious? With your copious free time at the paper?"

LaVonde blushed slightly. "She says her aunt - they're cousins, but they called her an aunt - anyway, she says her Aunt Ginny was..." LaVonde suddenly stopped and looked around for her own coffee cup.

"Was a..." LaVonde made a little forward-motion gesture with her hand.

LaVonde grimaced a little and looked away, then took a sip of coffee. "A witch-woman. She solved, um, problems. For people. When they couldn't go to the doctor, for instance."

H'Diane sat with an even expression for two seconds and then said, "She was an abortionist?"

LaVonde kind of waddled her head back and forth on her neck and then sighed. "Among other things. She cured sicknesses, sat with people, did births, sometimes arranged quiet adoptions. I get the impression it was a little of everything."

H'Diane sat and drummed her fingers on her knees for a moment, watching LaVonde very studiously *not* look back at her and finally said, "Why?"

"I said," LaVonde tried to smile, "I got curious."

"No, no, fine." H'Diane waved a hand around and dismissed that whole line of inquiry. "Not that. Why tell me?"

"Well..." LaVonde laughed finally, and shook her head. "It's probably nothing. It's ridiculous."

"No, no, you don't get off that easy." H'Diane smiled. She couldn't help it when LaVonde was acting uncharacteristically shy. "Out with it."

LaVonde looked away again, rubbing her thumb against the eraser tip of a pencil, concentrating hard, and finally she set her jaw and turned back. "Her cousin told me she thought Ramsey and English - the kid - that they were in danger from something..." H'Diane started to

say something and her expression suggested it might be of the *no shit* variety so LaVonde kept pressing, to cut her off. "Something old and dark. She made it sound... ancient." LaVonde actually shuddered a little. Mary Beth's words had stuck in her brain for two days now: *Something no one saw anymore, or talked about, anyway. Something dangerous. Something that scared him so bad he couldn't tell anyone else but an old woman no one would ever believe.* "She made it sound really scary and bad. Like, horror movie scary."

H'Diane arched both eyebrows and set her coffee mug down, leaning forward a little, sitting cross-legged with her back to the arm of the couch. "What do you mean?"

LaVonde shrugged it off and shook her head. "I don't know," she sighed. "Just... Mary Beth, the cousin, the way she said it. It gave me the creeps. Like something awful could be out there, just lurking, something old that nobody remembers anymore or talks about."

"What, the old man with the hook for a hand? What kind of campfire story did she tell you?"

LaVonde snorted. "See, I shouldn't have said anything."

H'Diane reached over and put her hand on LaVonde's knee. "No, I'm sorry. You can tell me anything. I shouldn't have made fun of you. You... well, to be honest, you seem like it really scared you. I was just trying to lighten the mood a little."

LaVonde stroked H'Diane's knuckles and smiled a little. "I know. It doesn't help you actually solve your current case, though, does it? So it's not much use."

H'Diane sighed and sat back again. "Well, no, I doubt I'd get very far if I walked into the station tomorrow and told the sheriff I was going to charge an ancient presence in the forests of Western North Carolina with two murders. It would be awfully convenient, though, to wrap up both at once."

"Still," LaVonde said with a smile, "Promise me you'll be careful. OK?"

H'Diane met her eyes and smiled. "I promise."

They sat back and both started to go back to their reading when, finally, H'Diane set her papers down again. "OK, I have something to tell you."

LaVonde set her own aside rather quickly and this time she was the one who leaned forward. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing's wrong," H'Diane smiled, "But it's weird that you would tell me that. See..." She cleared her throat. "I went through the case files at the station from that murder, the Ramsey/English murder. Clyde Wilfred kept something from the crime scene. It was this little leather bracelet that he found on English. He told one of the deputies at the time that it was a talisman. He didn't know what it was supposed to protect against, but he was very clear that it was supposed to be a... charm."

"Do you think Ginny Ramsey made it for him?"

H'Diane shrugged. "I wouldn't have said that ten minutes ago, but now? Maybe so."

The next morning, LaVonde called Mary Beth. She answered on the third ring with a heavy, already-tired sort of hello.

"Mary Beth," she began, "This is LaVonde? We met the other day?"

"I knew you'd call again," the woman said. "I could see it on you when you left."

LaVonde just let that go. No sense arguing about psychic powers or anything now; she had something to ask for. "Do you ever do... talismans?"

Mary Beth didn't answer for a moment and then said, "No love magic and no divorce magic."

So it was that easy, huh? Like an ad in the yellow pages? "It's not that," LaVonde said. "I was wondering, you said you thought your aunt was trying to help him with something evil and frightening from the past, something old that people wouldn't talk or think about anymore at the time."

"I don't know whether she made any talismans for him, Ms. Burke. I wouldn't know how to make the same thing."

"No, I understand," LaVonde said, "But could you make something that would... warn someone? Or something? Something that would protect against that sort of thing if it tried to show up, or if you got too close to it or something?"

After a long few seconds of thought in which LaVonde was certain that Mary Beth had hung up every time the line popped, she spoke. "I could do something sort of like that. Maybe. By when?"

"As soon as possible," LaVonde said, too quickly.

"A hundred bucks," Mary Beth said, "And you can pick it up tomorrow morning."

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Thirteen

There's no end to the lengths I'll go to, hunting high and low.

a-ha, "Hunting High And Low"

"The way I figure it," I said to Roderick as we rode down the elevator from his room, two nights later, "They've probably called a pow-wow by this point."

"Which 'they?'" He was dressed like it was '80s night at a goth club he didn't like: white pleather jacket, white parachute pants, a white shirt. It should have made him look less pale but instead it just made him look washed out, more pale than ever. His hair was loose rather than in a pony tail. I was dressed in my standard-issue black jeans, black boots, black trench coat, a black t-shirt for a band I'd never gone to see. One of the vampires down in Raleigh had given it to me. She was weird like that; in some ways, weird like Roderick. She did things kind of at random, and the shirt had been one of those things. She'd gotten the size right, though, and it was a black t-shirt, so there I was with fancy lettering across my chest that read, *SQUIRREL NUT ZIPPERS*. I'd figured it was for the candy, at first, before she'd explained.

"The local vampires and whoever all they're hiding," I said with a shrug. It seemed so obvious to me.

"And whom do they hide?" Roderick dug a bent cigarette out of a soft pack on the inside of his jacket. From the look of the package, the cigarettes were at least twenty years old. We don't have much call to care about stale smokes, though.

"I don't know," I sighed. I crossed my arms over my chest as Roderick stuck the cigarette in one corner of his mouth, palmed his lighter, began flipping it end over end between his thumb and index finger, impatient to light it but unwilling to draw a lot of attention to himself in the hotel where he slept during the day. I watched him flip the lighter back and forth a few times and then opened my mouth again. "This may be crazy, but I think there's a bunch of them."

"Why?"

"I dunno," I said. I reached up and rubbed the back of my neck again. "Just a hunch. You know, Carla and Blaine both fed in front of me."

Roderick grimaced in disgust, the cigarette bobbling between his clenched lips. "Gross," he muttered.

"I know. Weird behavior. I suspect there's some sort of social scene to which neither of us are privvy." I crossed my arms again. "I think if we find them, we find out the big secret."

"And what if we walk into a bar full of super-secret vampires?" Roderick nearly lit the cigarette, then caught himself. The elevator was taking about ten years getting to the lobby, I

had to admit.

"Easy," I said, stifling a yawn. It was still early. "We kill all of them but one and make that one talk."

"And then?"

"Kill him, too, of course."

Roderick and I each lit a cigarette outside the front doors of the hotel. He was staying in a nice place right smack in the middle of town. There were four night clubs, three open-late coffee shops and two performance venues in Asheville proper. There was also the country and western place out at the Holiday Inn by the airport, but that was where I'd go if we couldn't turn up anyone at any of the places downtown. For some reason, downtown just seemed like a better place to start, to me. We tend to be urban creatures. Always have been, according to tradition. You always hear that somewhere - New York, Los Angeles, Paris, wherever - there's a vampire who was a Roman Senator or a Greek philosopher or an ancient Chinese Mandarin, though I've never met any of them. All the history I've heard was oral tradition. Vampires are all mouth, anyway: teeth and tongue and talking. We don't write much down.

He and I agreed to split up to make it easier. If I went one way I'd be able to check out the juke joint and the goth bar, one of the performance venues and two coffee shops. Roderick could check the rest by going the opposite direction. If either of us spotted anything worth investigating we'd text the other with the letter T, easy to get to, easy to find, easy to type in a hurry. Roderick gave me a little salute and a mean smile and turned right to head off into the night. I watched him go for a second, though about asking if we could go together, then shook it off and went my way.

I had a lot of ground to cover.

The coffee shops were a bust. There were a bunch of high school kids and a few college students who'd ventured away from campus. I could smell a pot deal going down in the bathroom. So typical. Nothing ever changed. I ordered a small coffee, black, and had a taste of it before dumping it into the trash on my way out. My maker had taught me to keep food down but I'd never been much for coffee.

The performance venue was this club right there on Pak Plaza, downtown. There was some big-name band playing there and some protesters outside. I'd read about this in the paper: the club sold tickets online and a bunch of people from out of town had bought them all up. Hardly any locals could get in. They were pissed, there were letters to the editor. I figured if that was their biggest problem, Asheville was probably in pretty good shape.

I crossed the square, past the Vance Monument, the front steps and big glass doors of the BB&T building, the closest thing Asheville has to a skyscraper. The county jail and city police station were down the hill, across a long expanse of green lawn. In the summer, during Bele

Chere, this would be packed with bands and crafts vendors and crowds and funnel cakes. I wasn't there, of course - sunlight - but I'd come down once after dark and watched some of the very last acts one of the nights. It had been fun but not really my scene. Too many people walking around laughing and drunk and having fun. The last thing on my list was the little goth bar, this place catty-corner on the square from the rock club with the protesters. The night was cold and crisp and very clear and the moon was rising in the east like a big eye in the sky.

I could smell vampires before I got to the door. I stopped, looked around, sniffed the air. A kid in a fishnet shirt and a heavy winter coat came out the door of the little goth place and I felt the smell hit me like a weight pressing against the inside of my lungs, like an invasive presence.

I flipped open my phone and texted Roderick. Fifteen seconds later I got this back: OMW. *Whatever that means*, I thought to myself.

"On my way, of course." I'd asked Roderick when he got there and he'd laughed like I was a kid asking what a cuss word meant. "What else could it mean?"

I shrugged it off and pointed at the bar. I was sitting on the edge of the reflecting pool in Pak Plaza, facing the door. I hadn't seen or smelled anyone come or go but every time the heavy door opened and closed again I got another dose of heavy vampiric presence. "In there. Lots of 'em, by the smell."

Roderick settled in beside me, occasionally looking at his phone to tell the time. It was nearly midnight - I'd taken a long time walking and checking out the places on my list - and the moon was very high, over halfway across the sky already. Finally, at midnight, a little girl in a sort of Funereal Cheerleader look bopped out of the door and down the street and when the smell hit me I saw Roderick physically recoil - at first - and then lean forward, eyes closed, nose up, right into the smell.

"I think this is going to be so fun," he said. He smiled like it was Christmas morning.

I wasn't carrying any guns, of course, and neither was Roderick. You don't just go walking around town packing a bunch of heat. We wouldn't need it, anyway. I wanted destruction. I wanted to reach out and end their lives with my bare hands, and a gun doesn't give you that sense of satisfaction. All the Freudian fantasies in the world are no substitute for seeing the life go out of an enemy's eyes with your fingers wrapped around their neck. Of course, vampires can't be strangled to death, but still I wanted that immediacy of experience. I wanted to feel it happen. I wanted to express and assert myself in a very direct, tactile way that a gun would never allow.

Roderick and I stood up at the same time. I cracked my knuckles back and forth against the palms of each opposing hand, a loud and length process that sounded like treading on a box of crackers. Roderick simply took his hands out of his pocket and zipped up his jacket to the neck. I looked at him slightly oddly, I guess, because he smiled again and said, "I like this shirt too much to get a bunch of blood on it."

I laughed - I had to, I couldn't pretend I was any better than he was - and we walked in step to the front door of the club. I opened it, gestured for him to enter, he demured theatrically, insisted that I go first. I did so, finally, and the guy checking IDs at the door looked us up and down. I don't know what he was going to say - it could have been a get the hell out as easily as a word of hello - but I put my fist straight through the glass window he sat behind and into his face so that he went down in a heap.

Roderick pulled the door shut behind him, wrapped one hand around the old-fashioned handle and twisted it so that the door would be stuck then yanked the neon OPEN sign's cord out of the wall. I opened the door into the club proper, where no one had heard the thing with the window and the greeter because of the music. It was thumping, bass-heavy stuff with a gravelly voice going on about some damn thing or another. Roderick stepped up beside me and closed his eyes to sniff the air again. A few kids turned to look at us but I didn't pay them any attention. There was a back room somewhere, I could tell that, because the aroma was still thick in here but it trailed off past the expansive wooden bar and around a corner somewhere. I figured maybe half a dozen vampires, I couldn't be sure. Roderick was savoring their aroma way too much for my personal liking so I walked over to the bartender - tall, skinny, long hair, very good looks, early thirties. I bet he got a lot of action with a face like that in a joint like this. I chucked a thumb in the general direction of the back room and leaned forward. "Blaine come in?"

The bartender looked me up and down and sweat formed on his upper lip. He wasn't clueless; he knew enough to be scared, anyway. "Maybe," he said. "Lots of people come in."

"Not so many they can't all get out in a hurry, though, right?" I reached into a pocket, pulled out a thousand bucks in the form of a rubber-banded roll of twenties and tens. "I think maybe you're closing up early tonight."

He looked at the money, then reached out and took it. "I think maybe we're closing early tonight," he droned in response. I'd gotten the lock on his psyche that I needed.

"They need to go out the back, though, there's something wrong with the front door." I said that slowly and distinctly, close to his ear as he leaned farther in. "Now. There's something wrong with the sprinkler system and they need to go right now. The pipes in the back are making a funny noise."

He leaned back, put the wad of bills into his pocket and with glassy eyes walked over to the DJ booth, climbed into it, turned down the music gradually and leaned into a microphone. "Everyone, I hate to do this but we need to close up early. I think there's something wrong with the sprinkler system, there's a funny noise in the pipes in back, so I need everyone to go out the side entrance over here." He gestured with one hand and everyone looked at him, looked back at one another, looked back at him. "Seriously, folks, I hate to do this but it's a safety hazard. We'll be open again tomorrow night." Sullen kids started to pull jackets and some backpacks and various things back together and leave. I waited one minute, then two, and the twenty or thirty people there were all gone. The bartender came back with the same glassy expression and

looked at me. "And now you and the DJ," I said as I heard something wooden splinter nearby.

The bartender walked over to the DJ, grabbed him by the arm and dragged him, protesting, out into the street. The side door swung shut just as Blaine came around the corner from wherever the back room was. I guess he was going to ask what the hell was going on. He saw me and froze in place, mid-step.

Roderick had hidden in a shadow in a corner. He stepped out of it and drove a chair leg - that was the splintering sound - right through Blaine's chest so that it stick out covered in blood. Blaine gasped and wheezed and pawed at his own chest.

I smiled, walked over and took him by the neck with both hands. "Blaine," I said, very calmly, "I felt like maybe you didn't get the point the other night. It's a shame; I kind of liked you." Then I slammed his head down on the corner of a table so hard the table flipped up and over onto him. I grabbed it by the stem in the center with both hands, raised it, positioned the edge of the table over his neck and lifted it over my head to swing.

"Very creative," I heard Roderick say, then I brought the edge of the table down so hard on Blaine's throat that his head came off with a wet snap and a wrenching sound. I half-turned to watch it as it flew away across the tile floor, bounced once and then dissolved into ash in the span of a second. I turned back and his body had done the same.

I dropped the table on its side and dusted my hands with a little more drama than I'd originally intended. "That's one," I said.

Roderick grinned and clapped his hands a little. "Cousin," he breathed, voice high and shallow, "I think I love you more than I've ever loved anyone in our whole family."

I grunted. "Come on, less talk, more kill."

We both set off for the back room, where we could smell more vampires and hear nothing; they'd probably heard us dispatching Blaine. These wouldn't be surprised. We were going to have a fight on our hands.

What surprised me when we walked into the back room - a small room, walls painted with a cheap black that had flaked and chipped so that dots of the white innards of cement blocks were visible here and there, a pool table in the middle with a red felt cloth on it and a couple of pillars of chalk in the corner with not a lot else to look at besides a few posters for bands that were performing somewhere else and in the past - was how many vampires there were in there. Half a dozen, easily. Luckily for us, they were all young. Roderick still had that white pleather jacket zipped up to his neck and I'd have found it constricting to say the least but he's such a skinny little thing I'm not sure he noticed he was wearing it. He dropped into a crouch for about a quarter of a second before springing straight through the air and landing on the first one with his knees wrapped around the fellow's chest and his thumbs in his eyes.

The vampire in question was some Latino guy, so the second surprise was that Blaine couldn't handle a Puerto Rican with a flat tire, but he could a vampire? That was one of those

little factoids that snagged in my brain as I went about other business; namely, I had a pool cue down off the wall and was busy shoving it between the ribs on a skinny black kid whose fangs were out and whose eyes were bloodshot. I wondered idly if that was the guy Carla had meant - a scan of my peripheral vision told me she wasn't in the room - but didn't have a lot of time to think about it. I hit home with the cue, felt lukewarm blood spray out around where the stick was protruding from the guy's heart, and I let his weight help me snap it off at the injury point so that I could spin it with one hand and ram it through the mouth and up, through the brain pan, of one that came flailing towards me the moment we walked through the doors.

Three down, three to go. Nope, make that four. Roderick stood up from the one whose skull he'd just torn open with bits of gore and brain dripping from his hands and the four were still standing on the opposite end of the pool table. Our entrance and those three killings had taken something in the neighborhood of seven seconds.

They stared at us, two with their mouths open, one with her mouth closed, one with his fangs out and this ridiculous tongue-waggle like the lead singer for KISS. I remember making a little *pfiffut* noise of amusement.

"It isn't fair if you get more than I do, Cousin Withrow." Roderick was staring at the four of them, eyes flickering back and forth between them so fast a human wouldn't have been able to keep track.

"Actually, given this is my state and it's my autho -- " I paused, and edited. "My *wishes* we're acting on, it's totally fair."

Roderick made a little tsk noise and then the four of them came at us. One - a big fat white bubba of a guy - leapt onto the table and sprinted forward but I put my head down and one knee on the edge of the table so that I simply rammed him in the crotch with my forehead when he got to me. He went over my back head first, hands grasping but finding nothing there; I rolled forward, spun around and leapt back over the edge of it to plant both knees in his belly and punch him so hard in the chest that his sternum cracked and splintered ribs made little point marks at the outside of his *Boot-Scootin' Boogie* t-shirt like he was smuggling a giant spider under there.

Four seconds.

That was about as long as I should spend on any one target at any one time so I bounced off him and up into the air - more splintering noises from his chest cavity - and twirled with all the grace of a ballerina.

That's what told me they were all young, no more than twenty years a vampire, if that. They were slow and graceless and they moved like mortals. A vampire is outside the laws of physics in a lot of little ways. If we're given enough time to test our abilities, we find out we can move like the secret and anatomically impossible offspring of Baryshnikov and Jackie Chan with the strength of, oh, rough estimate? A *lot* of people. That's the best I can do on that score.

The woman - blond hair, athletic, small, like a gymnast - was coming at me with one of the pool cues in her hand like a javelin, and I respected her for at least trying to wield a weapon in

her own defense. She moved like molasses, though, and I swept the cue aside and put the flat of my left hand against her nose so hard that her whole face caved in and the small bones of her nose carved her own brain to pieces. She never even landed on the bubba at my feet, just turned to ash in mid-air. I wasn't breathing, of course, and I was very glad that I didn't have to. I bet it tasted just awful, all that greasy dust.

Three seconds. I was getting better.

Roderick had driven the legs of a stool against the wall through the chest of one of the guys who'd come after him and then used it to pin the last one against the wall behind the first one. They were both skinny sorts, skinheads from the look of it. I figured they were buddies. One of them probably turned the other after getting turned, himself. Roderick's tiny little arms had no difficulty holding the two of them in place and so I took the time to look around for a convenient weapon to behead the bubba, who was gurgling and struggling on the floor, trying to heal his own wounds but doing it painfully slowly.

"You got a knife? Machete? Anything?" I was glancing back and forth around the room. Roderick didn't look at me; he was studying the faces of the vampires he held pinned. The one in front, with the stool through his chest, was grunting and straining and his eyes were bulging out. The one behind was - well, I was surprised again, as he was crying and pleading. His arms were pinned to his sides by the legs of the stool and whatever he was saying came out in a liquid burble, confused, incomprehensible.

Roderick kept staring at them and finally said, very evenly, "No, Cousin. I didn't think to bring anything of the sort."

"Oh well," I sighed, "Nothing for it." I lifted one boot and brought it down square on the bubba's forehead. He tried to raise his arms to stop me but his wrecked chest wouldn't let him. His skull cracked like a walnut and he was a pile of dust before I'd even lifted the boot again for a second blow.

I turned around and dusted my hands off. That made twice in as many minutes. Not good if I wanted to avoid a reputation as a showboating prima donna. "Right," I said, sniffed, looked over our neo-Nazi friends. "Which one do we talk to?"

Roderick smiled. "You're letting me decide?"

The one in back still bubbled and burbled and the one in front still strained ineffectually. He was no stronger than a man. I wondered if he'd even been a vampire for a year. "Do the one in back," I said. "Put him out of his misery." Roderick shifted slightly and then drove another pool cue into that one's chest so that the one in front, the one who still had some fight in him, ground ash into the back of his jacket when he slammed against the wall, filling the void. He redoubled his efforts and the legs on the stool stretched just a little but he didn't have a hope against Roderick. I never would have guessed my cousin to be that strong. I decided not to think about what had occasioned his practicing his powers so thoroughly.

"Alright," I said, "Now let's do some talking."

kept going. We don't usually have to be like this - people, like the bartender, are easy to work the mojo on as a rule - so I had no idea what I was doing to his mind by being this rough with it. It didn't matter, though; I had already decided I couldn't let him live. I'd decided that before I'd known who he was, decided it when I'd said that *kill him too, of course* line to Roderick in the elevator. At the time it had felt like cheap but effective machismo and now, standing here, I knew I'd meant it deep down in a way I'd not even been conscious of when the words came out my mouth like so many *how are you's*.

"Emergency meeting," he grunted. "Only ones who made it."

"About what," I said with a hint of a smile, "Was the emergency meeting?"

He didn't get proper grammar like that for a long moment, or maybe he was still fighting me in some way I couldn't detect, but finally his eyes closed and he tried again to twist away from the wall. Roderick mashed harder on the seat of the stool so that the guy groaned long and low, like a wounded bear. "You," he whispered.

I leaned in close enough to smell the terror on his skin and whispered, "And who am I?" He tried not to answer, tried to snap at me with his fangs but I was two feet away before he could blink. I laughed. I laughed right in his face and then leaned in again. "Who am I?"

"Withrow," he finally managed.

"No," I said. "I'm the *boss*. Who made you?"

He fought so hard against telling me that I started to lose my grip on his will. I had to put both hands against his face and hold his head steady against the wall so that he looked me in the eye. He closed his eyes in defiance so I reached up and pulled them open with my finger tips on his eyelids. He groaned again and I heard one of the legs on the stool start to splinter.

"Cousin Withrow," Roderick said very casually, "I think we might need another chair in a few moments."

"Tell me," I growled at him and I felt his will snap a moment before the chair did so that he gasped, strangled, then blurted out the name: the Transylvanian. It wasn't much of a surprise, but it was nice to have it confirmed.

When the chair finally split down the middle, Roderick didn't spare a half of a second driving his fingers through the guy's neck and grabbing him by the spinal column from the wrong side. There was a snap and then a cloud of dust and we both stood there blinking for a moment.

"Cousin," Roderick started to say, voice oddly light, but I squeezed his shoulder with one hand and shook my head.

"Not now, Roderick," I sighed. "I need a cigarette."

The urge to go driving straight to Brevard, middle of the night, kick in every door and challenge him right then and there was pretty strong. Roderick and I slipped out the back door just in time to see the bartender and the DJ coming back looking confused. The hoodoo I'd put on them to get them and everyone else out of the club would wear off sooner or later, I knew, and I

guessed from their return that it was sooner. The bartender looked at me for a moment like he might recognize me but then shook his head and kept walking. At least I'd gotten that part right.

The guy checking IDs, the one I'd punched, Roderick had slapped awake and I'd hoodoo'ed him, too. I figured we were pretty safe, he didn't get much chance to look at us, but still. Better safe than sorry, as they say.

That is, actually, why I refrained from going after the Transylvanian right then. If that vampire back there was telling the truth - and from what I'd seen of breaking down the barriers in his head, he was - then there were ten more vampires somewhere in Western North Carolina, plus the Transylvanian, plus Clyde Junior if he'd already been turned. I had, at this point, to assume that Marty Macintosh and Carla Van Buren were among those ten, so really there were eight that we needed to find. Thing was, they could be anywhere and if there had been an emergency meeting called then they were all aware that I was out and probably looking for them. They were going to lay very low for a while, was my guess. Either that, or the Transylvanian's hold on them was strong enough that they'd go to protect him. Somehow I doubted that, though. If he'd been spending years populating this third of the state with his own personal brood, he probably didn't want to ask them for help for all the same reasons I had turned away Roderick's earlier offers of assistance in all this: he didn't want to look like he *needed* the help.

Another good reason to wait was this: if there'd been a meeting, the Transylvanian knew about it. He'd be waiting to hear from them. If he didn't hear from them, he'd get nervous. I wanted him nervous, a little frightened. I wanted him to know that death was coming for him.

None of this, however, explained away the old murder from back in the day. Sure, so the Transylvanian was going to turn Clyde so he'd killed off his family. Very traditional, like I've said. Maybe a little overboard. Maybe *too* traditional in the end; after all, I'd never have gotten involved first if he hadn't done that. Still, there was some connection to the old murder, I felt certain; it was too much to claim that it was coincidence the Transylvanian would go after the kid of my last living friend. With enough leg work, maybe - *maybe* - someone could independently figure out that Clyde and I knew one another but no, it would be a lot easier for the Transylvanian to have found out by virtue of being interested the whole time, ever since the murders happened, keeping an eye on Clyde and thus finding out that he and I knew one another by witnessing the times we met out there in that old field.

Well, whatever. These were questions I could ask him when I saw him. I wanted to wait just a night or two for that, but no more; I wanted to talk to him real, real soon. Roderick and I split up again after we walked back to his hotel. I went on home and sat out on the back porch with Smiles curled up on the back porch beside me. It was cold, but I didn't much mind. I didn't turn on any lights, didn't even try to do a crossword or play with the little sudoku gadget I'd gotten. I didn't check my email, didn't try this Gmail thing Roderick said he wanted me to use. Nothing. I just sat and listened to myself listen to myself.

Around five in the morning, I went to bed and lay there while the sky turned from black to

purple and then purple to blue. At that point I closed all the blinds, climbed into bed and read a book for a few minutes. The next thing I knew, the clock read 5:33pm and another day had passed in the land of the living.

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Fourteen

Find a way out or die.

--Argyle Park, "Misanthrope"

"He'll probably turn Clyde Junior tonight," I said to Roderick on the phone. Yeah, yeah, electronic bugs, whatever. They listen for other stupid stuff these days. The way I reckon, the only vampires that ought to worry about telephones anymore are the ones speaking Arabic. That's people for you: always worried about the wrong damn thing.

"Why tonight?" Roderick's voice was wispy and wistful. It was easy to imagine him staring at nothing in his hotel room, talking on the phone, legs crossed, sitting hunched forward on the bed as though there were a spiritual TV only he could see, hovering in space three feet to the left of the physical one.

"Just a hunch," I finally replied. "He didn't hear from anybody after the little tea party pow-wow they were having about me last night. He would have tried to get hold of them somehow. When that failed, he'd have to decide they're dead or flipped, sooner or later, no matter how he went about looking into it. He'll be wanting all the loyal allies he can get. My guess is he's putting out calls to the others right now. If they're all in Asheville already, which is a little unlikely what with there not being enough people for them all to stay hidden all the time, some of them will take a while to make it to Brevard. I figure he'll plan a big headcount affair tomorrow night, giving him tonight to turn Clyde and get him somewhat ready for his coming-out tomorrow." I shrugged, sitting on the porch again, talking quietly. Smiles was prowling around the back yard, sniffing at leaves and then taking a leak on them.

"Okay," Roderick said, "So what do we do?"

"Well, let's play a little what-if. If he tells Clyde Junior tonight's the big night, what's the first thing he's going to want to go do?"

There was silence on the line and then Roderick chuckled. "Look at the world. Look at what he just lost?"

"Exactly. I figure Clyde Junior gets one last visit to mom and dad's, either before or right after. Right?"

Roderick had always lived in the home where he grew up, so to him it was all hypothetical, but I knew exactly where I'd gone the night I was turned. I went to my parents home - the one where I sat right now, if you factor in rebuilding after the fire - and just watched it from the trees. My family had been there at the time but of course I didn't show myself to them. I'd chosen to say goodbye to all of that already. To be honest, the temptation to *spea*k to them wasn't even there. I wasn't going to miss them very much. I hadn't known at the time what their fates would

be and I wouldn't have wished it on them had I known, but I wasn't exactly stewing over how to keep them in the dark, either. Roderick had been born by then, but just barely. I knew him as nothing more than a proxied signature in a Christmas card. It's funny how life works out, isn't it?

"Hmmm," Roderick finally said. "Perhaps so. Shall I meet you there?"

"Nah, it's a pain in the ass to find," I said. "I'll be OK."

"But what if the Transylvanian decides to go with him? I wouldn't want you to face him alone."

I chuckled a little. "Don't worry about me," I said. "I'll worry enough for both of us."

I pulled into that little nook in the woods again and hid my car in the darkness between the trees. It had been a few nights since I'd been back to Clyde and Sarah's place and I wondered if the cops would even still be watching it, looking for Clyde Junior. Probably not. From what I've read and what Clyde told me, most of the motion on a case like this happens in the first few days and then drops off real fast. Leads either turn into an arrest or they dry up completely. Media saturation only buys them so much in the way of information from the public at large. It was probably safe, therefore, but I wanted to be stealthy anyway. I didn't want to alert Clyde Junior to my arrival, if he were already there, anymore than I wanted to alert the cops if *they* were there.

With Smiles silently padding along between the underbrush and the trees, me in my boots and doing my best Injun Tracker walk, we progressed up the hill and over it to stop about five feet back from the tree line. I was dressed more consciously ninja-fied tonight, black parachute pants, brand new black t-shirt without any letters or markings or anything, black trench coat, black gloves, black boots, etc. I stopped and listened for a long time, able to see nothing moving in the house and nothing in the yard. No sign of Clyde Junior yet. It was just barely past eight o'clock and I doubted the Transylvanian could have turned Clyde Junior so fast that he'd be up and about and here already. I hunkered down on my heels, gestured Smiles over and wrapped my coat around him so he'd stay a little warmer and keep me a little warmer while he was at it. The cold didn't usually bother me but something about that night made me want to be warm.

Ten minutes, twenty, forty five. I heard a church down the valley somewhere chime nine o'clock. Smiles stayed put right beside me, as loyal a companion as he could possibly be. There weren't any birds, no bats, no bugs, nothing in this weather, this far up the mountain. We just sat and listened to nothing for a very long time.

I was a little surprised, then, when I smelled a predator approach at the same time that I heard a car come up the gravel road, way down the base of the hill, half a mile or more away. I looked around, but still couldn't see anyone or anything. Smiles jerked his head upwards and I followed his gaze. Just barely visible against the clouded night sky was something reflecting some light back from that damned night light in the yard. It got bigger, very slowly, and I could see that it was Clyde Junior trying to come in for the world's clumsiest landing.

So, that was that. He'd been turned and he'd taken a life and his Last Breath was to fly in his own natural shape. Huh. Takes all kinds. He wasn't very good at flying, though, and he was basically spiraling down, sort of backpedaling, trying to get a handle on landing without breaking both his legs. Maybe he'd do just that, I thought, and make it easier on both of us.

The crunch of gravel got closer and closer, slowly, crunching rocks together beneath its tires as it came our way. Light car, nothing big and old and heavy, so probably not the Transylvanian. Hell, I doubted he knew how to drive, the way he acted. That was no good at all, because that meant either a neighbor - harmless - or a cop. Nobody else in the world would be up here that I could imagine. I prayed to something, somewhere, that they didn't spot my car hidden back in the woods.

Clyde finally pinwheeled into place, more or less, on the ground. He stopped, looked around, blinked a little and then laughed a hearty, belly-shaking laugh that chilled me right to the core. Clyde Junior wasn't here to remember a family he'd never see again; he was returning the victor.

I knew in that moment that Clyde Junior had killed Clyde himself. He'd probably done something to cause his mother's heart attack, too, and sliced open the brake lines on his father's work partner's car. He'd killed them all so that he'd be free to become one of us.

I stood up and walked out from between the trees, still hearing that car coming, and punched the palm of my left hand with the knuckles of my right, grinding them together. "Evening, Clyde," I murmured. He spun and stared at me, then recoiled a little and looked choked. "That's predator smell," I said, and I smiled. "You didn't notice it on the Transylvanian because he made you. Something about that cancels it out. Makes me wonder sometimes why more of us don't kill our makers since they can't see us coming, but then, all the other weird little connections probably provide some subconscious inhibition we don't even know we have."

Clyde Junior was still staring at me, but he finally closed his mouth and hitched up his pants. "What do you want?"

"First, I want that amulet."

Clyde blinked at me for a minute and then said, "How'd you know about the bracelet?"

"Long story," I said. "I bet you're not wearing it anymore but you've got it on you. Am I right?"

Clyde was too stupid not to put his hand in his left pocket, which I could see bulged a little with a circle of some sort. So, he did have it, and he couldn't wear it anymore. If he could wear it, he'd have already had it on. That was simple enough.

"Second, I think I want to kill you." I shrugged. No reason not to tell him the truth. We both started when there was a crunch of metal back down the road and a horn went off for a second. I didn't know what that meant so I banked on it meaning a signal of some sort. That was all I needed. I swept forward, coat flung open and back like the classic cape - some things we do because, you know, we *have* to - and leapt up to come down on top of Clyde. He put his

arms up to try to protect himself but if a kid who's been a vampire for a decade still doesn't really know his own strength - like the skinheads in that goth bar - then Clyde was about as steady on his feet as an infant. I knew what it felt like, the world just overwhelming his senses, everything made out of crystal and light, everything too beautiful to look at and you feeling so strong in the middle of it all. No, he was too befuddled by the grandeur of what the world looks like to *us* to be able to put up anything like a resistance. I yanked his arms out of the way before we'd even fallen to the ground, landing with my knees pinning his upper arms to the dirt. He cried out - not good - so I reached down and put one fat hand all the way around the front of his throat and leaned down, very close, to hiss at him.

That made him shut up real fast.

"Did you know who I was, before?"

"Wh... wh..." Clyde's voice wobbled in his throat, strained, couldn't get out. He was panting, still in the habit of breathing, still half reacting with human instinct.

"Did your father ever tell you who I was? Anything about me?"

Clyde tried to shake his head but I still had my hand around his throat, the other pulled back and the fingers arched halfway to making a fist, halfway to looking like B-movie claws. "Nothing," he wheezed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Was it your idea or *his* to kill off your family?"

"His," he gargled. "His! He made me." Clyde Junior was panting and struggling still but he was so very weak. He was like a paper doll.

"Did he tell you why?"

"So I'd be free," Clyde managed. I saw tears of blood start to well up in his eyes - he stank of it, had drunk himself fat on it after he'd been turned. I wondered what poor soul had given up their life to sate that first, awful hunger, when we feel like we're empty inside, like the only thing we'll ever be able to do, ever again, is drink. He started to sob, then, strangled and choked but he was crying, no doubt about it. "He said I'd be free to live forever, to find a way out."

I didn't ask out of what, or where. I knew. We were soaking in it: a dying town, no industry, no job but as night watchman for a factory that didn't even make anything more, living at home with his parents all his fifty long years. Maybe he'd had a girlfriend or two, maybe he'd fathered a kid or two, maybe he didn't even know about them. He'd been stuck here his whole life and always would be and then he'd turned the wrong corner, explored the wrong long, dark hallway at work - or maybe the Transylvanian had come to him, maybe he'd engineered the guy getting the job in the first place? - and there'd been someone ancient and who could sound so strong and so wise and he'd said, *Want to get away from all this stupid shit, kid?* It had worked for me, hadn't it? No doubt it worked for Clyde Junior. I'd had money, some talent as an artist, opportunities to go somewhere and study if I wanted. Clyde Junior didn't have dick. He had two parents who'd gotten old enough they'd start needing care one day and he was the only one

they'd ever have to give it. He'd been born and raised in their home, lived out a pathetic little life in their home and would watch them waste and die while he himself got old and started to follow their footsteps in their home. It probably felt like he'd never had a thing of his own and then here he was with an offer to have the whole world, all eternity, as his very own.

I didn't bother moralizing or lecturing or wondering whether I could train him better, make a better vampire out of him. I didn't think about any of that at all. I held him still and said, very slowly, "You killed my best friend."

I pulled my hand back from his throat and punched him in it so hard I heard the firmer tissues, cartilage or whatever they are, splinter and collapse. That was just to keep him quiet, though, so I could separate his head from his body with my bare hands, one knee on one of his shoulders for leverage, and not have him scream bloody murder while I did so. I stopped, though, just as I started to pull so that he was straining and wriggling, and knelt back down beside him.

"This is what a vampire is," I whispered into his ear. I dropped my fangs down, bent his neck roughly to one side. If he'd been mortal he'd have asphyxiated by then, but that's one of the nice things about being undead. Try as he might to breathe, out of habit, and as much panic as the failure to do so might cause in him just a couple hours after the Big Flush, he was still alive and kicking. Sort of. Alive enough, anyway. I drove my teeth into the thick flesh of his neck, hit the vein and started drinking as hard as I could.

Clyde was enough of a vampire to struggle when a mortal would have slipped into utter acquiescence and his hand came out of his pocket with the bracelet in his fingers. Something about it nearly shone in the dim light of the stars, something inside it that sang out at that moment. I paused and pulled my mouth away from his neck and some of his blood - much to my surprise - sprayed out and of course, because these things always happen, splattered right on the bracelet. For an instant it shone ruby red instead of white and Clyde's fingers smoked a little even though he dropped it and screamed and my teeth drove between the folds of his neck one last time.

The Last Breath of a mortal gives us a rush of powers, an ability to tap into something unique to each of us - Carla's healing, my turning out all the lights, Clyde's ability to fly. I'd never done this to a vampire before and as the last of the blood went down my gullet I wondered if the same thing happened with us. If it did, see, that meant something weird. It meant, well, by one interpretation of the Last Breath - and there are a lot of interpretations, I assure you - it meant that we have souls, or something like them, some spark of life. Maybe it's just what keeps us animate, I don't know. I felt Clyde's life slip away and into me and I tossed his corpse to the side and sat down on my haunches. Smiles whined a little, still sitting loyally just inside the tree line.

There was a terrible noise somewhere, like mountains having sex with one another. Two seconds of listening and closing my eyes against the intense brightness of the night and that yard with a night light on the other side of the house told me that it was shoes on gravel. It was

someone walking up the gravel road from whatever had happened to crunch the car so bad a minute or two ago, and I could hear it like it was being piped through a sound system and I'd gotten my head shoved into the speakers.

I stood up, wobbled a little, then ran for the edge of the tree line. I had to get back to my car and get to the Transylvanian fast because I knew, deep down, that he would feel that connection between maker and made that I'd severed when I'd drunk the last of Clyde Junior's life. Then I slapped my forehead, turned around and ran back to the corpse. I was a little surprised it hadn't already turned to ash, but maybe when they're so young, just a few hours old, parts of them maybe still alive, maybe it took longer then. I fumbled around on the ground and tried to grab the bracelet but my hand felt like I'd put it on a hot stove when I touched it. I'd soaked it in a vampire's blood and if that little poem Clyde had stowed away in his office meant what it obviously had to mean, I wouldn't be able to touch that thing ever again. I yelped and drew my hand back and heard the boots on gravel stop for a moment, then start running. Gods, I was blowing everything. I finally just left it and took off back into the trees, again, and Smiles and I made our way a few feet back into the shadows where things were darker and my eyes wouldn't hurt so much from how bright everything was.

We didn't have long to wait. The boots left the gravel road, tore through the trees on the road side of the house like a thousand drums beating in time to one another and erupted into the yard. It was a stout little asian woman, just had to be that detective with the sheriff's department, the one I'd seen quoted in the paper. She had a gun out and she spun in a circle with it held out in what I regarded as a very professional but maybe not *practiced* stance, more like a cop on TV than I imagine cops are in real life, before running over to Clyde's very cold body and leaning down to feel his throat. I hadn't thought to lick the wound closed, figuring he'd ash the moment I was done, so her fingers stayed there for a moment and she studied him. She put her hands to his forehead, the sides of his face. She had to be thinking he'd been dead for hours, surely, as cold as he must have been.

She stood up and pulled a radio out of her belt and spoke into it, voice terse. "I need two units and an ambulance at the Wilfred residence in Mills River, immediately." There was some garbled, staticky response and then she said it again, louder. "There's been a murder," she said, and she said it that way, in total surprise, there's been a *murder*, two or three more times before slapping the radio back into its holster. Then she pulled it back out and shouted, "And I hit a deer on my way up here so watch out for my car, it's in the middle of the goddamn road."

I was feeling a little giddy from the blood, from drinking down another vampire like that, and I giggled a little then slapped my hand over my mouth. I don't know whether she saw me or heard me or what, but all of a sudden she jerked her flashlight in my direction and before I'd even thought about it, before even instinct had time to kick in, I'd blanked all the woods around me for thirty feet in complete darkness. Her flashlight wouldn't be any good to her. She was staring straight at me, but I knew she had to see nothing but darkness.

"I know you're there," she said. "I could see something move a second ago."

I could smell fear. I could smell it as rich and as sweet as an apple pie fresh out of the oven. It was pouring off of her the way it never does off of humans, and I realized that was just another side effect of being slap full of another vampire's blood. *It's a wonder there are any of us left*, I thought, *That we don't just gobble each other up all at once*. I closed my eyes for a moment and just let the smell fill me, then breathed out. I opened my eyes to find she was still standing there, still waving the flashlight around.

"I know you're there!" she said again. "I know it!" That time, though, her voice sounded less sure, less certain. If I just kept my cool, she'd turn around and go back down to her car and forget all about how I was ever here. I could hoodoo her, sure, but in this state I knew I was liable to erase every memory she'd ever had, much less the last five minutes. I stayed very still, Smiles beside me, and let the darkness just hang out there in the air, soaking up all the light it could.

She lowered the flashlight a little, took a step forward, paused, lowered the flashlight again, took another step, then stopped and raised the flashlight, thinking. Finally, in pretty much that rotation, she edged up to the trees themselves, maybe five feet from me. I wondered if she could smell Smiles; I don't smell like much, but he's a dog every day. She squinted her eyes and raised the flashlight again and then, very tentatively, reached out and, I could guess, tried to *touch* the darkness.

In that moment, I had a terrible decision to make.

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Fifteen

I feel blood inside the vein, I feel life inside the ligament.

--Franz Ferdinand, "What You Meant"

The thing was, I should have killed H'Diane Bing right then and there. I should have just stepped forward, broken her neck and left. That would have been the smart thing to do; the *vampire* thing to do. But here was a smart, young detective on a case she would very likely find impossible to crack all the way. All her leads had dried up days ago. She'd come out here tonight to watch the house, most likely, the way I imagined it was her who'd been here a few nights before, when I was. She probably came out here every night, after her shift, sitting and watching and waiting, hoping something would happen. Well, something had happened, alright. Clyde Junior, the Transylvanian, me, we'd all *happened*. She was up to her neck in it and she had no idea. She didn't need to ever have an idea, either.

Okay, so she reminded me of Clyde, standing out there in that field, going back every five years to talk to his vampire friend, wondering if he'd ever know the truth. He never would. *She* never would either, I knew that, but maybe it would be okay if I just... left her be.

On the other hand, I could step out and introduce myself. If she reminded me that much of Clyde, maybe I should go all the way. Wouldn't hurt to have a cop friend up here again, would it? It certainly proved useful when Clyde was working cases for the SBI. I dug a lot of information out of him in tiny flakes over the decades. Only seeing him every five years didn't put much of a dent in that, really. Most stuff with vampires moves real, real slow. So, if option A was to kill her the way ninety nine out of a hundred other vampires would have done because it would be the smart thing to do, that was option B: drop the darkness, offer a hand and try to make nice.

But there was option C, and that was just as good: let her find the bracelet, see if she figured it out and *leave her the hell alone*.

She stood there, one hand out, sort of testing the edge of all that shadow I'd produced. Her flashlight was hanging loose in the other hand. She'd figured out it wouldn't do any good. I stood there, stock still, and let her poke and prod all that she wanted. Then, finally, she turned around and walked back over to Clyde Junior. I could smell the decomposition starting to happen. I couldn't tell how fast or how long it would take but I knew he'd be a pile of ash before long. God, I wondered, how on earth is she going to explain that?

She started patting him down, checked that he had a wallet but didn't pull it out, checked his pulse again, and then surprised me by picking up the bracelet with obvious interest, looking at it for long seconds, then fishing around inside her shirt to produce a little leather loop on a long

string around her neck. The leather had a kind of new smell about it, like it'd just come from a store, and the leather - my eyes were this powerful after draining Clyde Junior - had fresh tears and seams in it where it had been cut up, then sewn back together. There were tiny little teeth around the edge and two iron nails driven through it and sewn in so that they formed a cross. H'Diane compared it and the bracelet and though they weren't the *same*, they clearly had the same general design sense.

Curiouser and curiouser.

She knelt there for a moment and then produced a scrap of paper from a pocket. She unfolded it. I could tell it was a small and hastily folded piece of lined paper from a little flip-pad. She mouthed the words on it to herself and I could hear so clearly that the half-whisper of sound carried to me like a shout:

*If danger's high and hurtful nigh
This necklace will give out a cry
No one shall hear it but you my dear
You'll know the reason for your fear
It warns you if there's bad around
Do not ignore this silent hound*

Christ, but I hadn't counted on there being that much folk magic around. I sighed a little to myself. I don't know what it is about us, but we draw out all the old ways in a hurry whenever we're active. H'Diane went on comparing the two and then looked like she might slip the bracelet on. If she did, if I didn't stop her, she'd be protected from vampires as long as she wore it. She reminded me of Clyde, yes, but did she remind me of him that much? Did I see so much of my friend in her that I could let her not just escape but give her an infallible defense against us?

That made the decision for me. I stepped forward, through the trees, and watched a molasses tide of shadow roil and flow in front of me. H'Diane saw it too and slipped the bracelet on without even thinking about it. She stood up as I approached - invisible to her, I could tell, because her eyes remained on that wash of darkness instead of finding me - and I stopped so that that cloud of night was boiling a few inches from her feet. From memory, I spoke Clyde's poem:

*When Sun is low and Moon is high
Cold on you and danger nigh
Drench in blood of what you fear
Wear on wrist or keep it near
It stops the danger keeps you whole
It helps dear Jesus save your soul*

H'Diane blinked as she listened, her eyes on and around me as she located my voice in the mass before her. "Where is that from? What is that?" Her voice was a little weak, a little wobbly. She'd seen about all the fireworks she could take; this was no time to strike up a friendship.

"It's old. It was written for the bracelet you're wearing."

"You..." She swallowed. "You made the 911 call."

I stood there in silence, watching her. She was either going to faint or she was going to do the very human thing of folding this into her continually expanding world view and learn to accept it.

"Tell no one that you have the bracelet. It will keep you safe from... us."

"What 'us?' What the hell are 'us?' What are you?"

"No one of consequence," I said softly.

"My..." H'Diane closed her mouth and reached up to wipe her mouth on her sleeve. I figured she was probably about to puke. "My girlfriend had this necklace made for me. She said that a witch-woman told her that whatever this was wrapped up in was old and dark and hidden in the hills so that people didn't talk about it anymore."

"She was right." I cleared my throat a little; I didn't need to stick around, I needed to go! Precious seconds, a whole minute, had gone by while I dithered and hemmed and hawed and put on this little show. "Be careful of us."

H'Diane started to go for her gun again but I didn't care about that. I'd already let her have the bracelet. It wouldn't be any use to try fighting her. I simply turned around and walked back into the trees, Smiles plodding along beside me in my dark fog.

"I could arrest you," H'Diane called after me, somewhat weakly.

I called over my shoulder, "Maybe next time."

I stopped once I was well up the hill and out of sight and hearing range so that I could watch H'Diane either adjust or refuse to adjust. To my surprise, she knelt again by Clyde Junior, patted him down on the other side and came out with a little leather holster for a little steel knife. It was technically within the limits of what state law would allow Clyde Junior to carry but the blade was wicked sharp, way sharper than it was when he picked it up at whatever gun and knife show he'd been haunting, waiting for the perfect blade.

I could smell his father's blood on it even though it had been wiped down. Junior had carried it since the murder as a souvenir, I guessed. H'Diane handled it very delicately, realizing that it was probably a clue. She'd have enough DNA samples from it by next week to know it was the murder weapon used on my old friend.

I felt such a tremendous sense of satisfaction in that moment that my mind was made for me. I turned and walked away, silent as I could be, through the woods. The darkness dragged with me for a ways but when I looked back, H'Diane Bing was back at the edge of the trees, watching after me, as though she could see me go. I knew that she didn't and she just stood

there, scanning the trees, until Smiles and I went over the lip of the hill and down the other side.

I walked back up to my car to find Roderick leaned against it. His little red rental sports car was sitting next to mine. I couldn't believe that cop had driven past both of our cars without spotting them or that Roderick had managed to find the place *or* that Roderick had gone against my orders.

"Hello, Cousin Withrow." He said it quietly but cheerfully, like greeting me outside church on a Sunday morning. "I hope you don't mind my being here."

"Depends on why you're here," I said, a little stiff.

"Well, you needed someone to watch your back. Good thing I was here, too, otherwise that deer might not have gotten thrown at her car." He coughed quietly, one hand delicately covering his mouth. He smiled, though, when he was done. "Also, I can never resist a little excitement." His eyes sparkled as he said it, and then he looked me up and down. "You look different." He smacked his lips. "Glowy."

"Glowy?"

He nodded once, certain. "Yes. Something happened up there."

"I killed Clyde Junior," I said. "Now, I'm going to see the Transylvanian and really, *really* need not to be followed this time. Okay?" I had one hand on the handle of the driver's side door of the Firebird, the keys in my other hand.

Roderick smiled and winked and opened the door of his own car. "Scout's honor."

I drove thirty minutes, out 280 again, then turned onto 64, then up that long, lonely mountain road. When I roared into the parking lot of Clarke Industries' Brevard Operations Center I parked it across the handicapped spot in front of the gate house doors, got out and strode inside. There was no more need to be formal or stealthy or pretend-nice. It was time to finish this and move on.

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Sixteen

Not even the rain can make me clean... Contemplate the price of those shadows.

--Faith & the Muse, "Failure to Thrive"

I was halfway up the walk towards the old factory's production plant when I heard the Transylvanian's voice about five feet to my left. "You've killed him," he said. "I can smell him on you."

It took everything dark and terrible every vampire carries inside just to keep from jumping ten feet in the air at that. Instead I stopped and looked over where the voice was. There was nothing there but empty space.

"You killed the others, too, didn't you?" This time he was ten feet behind me. I turned slowly; nothing but air.

"What purpose did you think that would serve?" The voice was twenty feet further up the walk, towards the building. The door in, the one I'd used when I'd first come here, was sitting there just like always. I doubted it was any more locked now than it had been then. I felt around with all my senses, still hyper-tuned from drinking down Clyde, and I knew there was nothing there but the voice. So that's what the Transylvanian could do, I figured; he could speak from afar. Weird, but probably very useful. I wondered if there were any half-crazy county commissioners up in these old mountains who'd heard his voice in their offices from time to terrifying time.

"They were a disease, a cancer," I growled. "I am stamping them out. They endanger every last one of us."

"I don't think that's it." The sound of the Transylvanian's voice had moved again, closer to the door into the factory. "I think you *liked* killing them. I think you're the monster here."

I laughed. There wasn't much else to do, was there? "You want monster?" I laughed again and shadows shot out in ribbons from around my feet, wove themselves together in a delicate lattice, bound together into an armor of darkness, a bubble that shifted and drifted just a little a few feet out from me. "I've got enough monster for both of us, you redneck old fucker."

The Transylvanian made a little 'tsk' noise that made my blood boil. "You've no respect for your elders, young man." His voice had moved towards the doors again. He was baiting me, I knew this, and I did not care in the least.

"You should see what I did to my elders," I muttered and in a flash few mortal eyes could have detected I shot in the door and was running down the hall and taking the stairs upwards three at a time.

"Do you dare to enter my domain and challenge me?" The voice stayed three yards ahead

of me as I ran. I marveled, somewhere in some left over part of my mind, at the control he exhibited over this odd little power. I myself was practically floating from step to step. I hadn't escaped the bounds of gravity by any stretch, I was putting one boot down after another as I climbed, but I could feel the tiniest touch, just enough to catch a whiff, of Clyde Junior's power of flight. Another secret of my kind I'd learned in one night, another to file away for later and wonder how many of us knew this - that we could super-charge our powers by draining one another, that we could take just a little of their own Last Breath and use it as our own.

"I'm coming after you, aren't I?" Normally a big guy like me would have stroked out a flight up but that's one of the many advantages of having a purely optional respiratory system. My voice was steady and even. I wouldn't sweat, wouldn't pant, wouldn't get tired for a very long time. Those are all the things we think about when we accept the big flush, all those flashy entrances by our makers-to-be, the effortlessness, the inherent grace. We don't think about the other 360 nights of the year. Now, though, I was perfectly happy to revert to those old tricks of showmanship if it was down to a head-on turf war between me and the Transylvanian. Maybe he'd kept in top form and maybe not. I didn't see him having a lot of excuses to stand around flexing the mojo in a factory full of mortals much less an empty one.

"You are," the voice said. It sounded... pleased. Almost. That was enough to make me stop cold in my tracks. "Oh, there's no trap," he assured me. He'd dropped a lot of the drawl now and sounded more mature, more intelligent; to be frank, more cunning. "It's just a pleasant surprise. It's the old way, you know. From *before*."

"Before what?" I was annoyed at all this, suddenly, and leaned against the hand rail on the stairs - four flights up and he was still leading me higher - and let the shadow and darkness coil around me while I lit a cigarette that guttered weirdly in that veil of shadow.

"Before vampires started laying claim to territories that weren't theirs. Before the Bobs started showing up in North Carolina, before *you*. You want rules, order, good behavior. You want safety and certainty. You eradicate my children because you can't control or cow them, because they don't recognize your... *authority*. You don't even consider that there might be another way, a way just as safe if not safer for all of us, a way older than you or your maker."

I took a long drag and tried to look bored. "What way is that?"

"The way we lived for millenia before this modern era of cell phones and false identities and computer records and *fixers*." He said 'fixers' like it smelled bad. "To live quietly, to accrete power and wealth to sustain us, to create communities around ourselves that would rely on us as much as we relied on them, to create quiet opportunities the cattle can't afford to deny us." He tsk'ed again and it made me even angrier this time.

The voice had started drifting upstairs again and I followed it this time at an easier pace, watching warily the spot from which it seemed to emanate. I wasn't going to be caught off guard by him appearing out of nowhere. If he could throw his voice that was one thing; if he could turn invisible that was quite another. "I'm not sure I understand," I said, though I understood well

enough: the village at the foot of Dracula's castle, perhaps? The peasants who refuse to look at Harker when he's leaving, the villagers who cross themselves at the sight of Dracula's obsidian coach. The Transylvanian was training up vampires to be monsters like him who cowed and herded the humans around them - Carla healing up that old man so he'd leave her more of his wealth when he died, Blaine draining the Latinos dry because he didn't like them on 'his' turf, both of them taking big actions that would start tiny rumors they could nurture and tend and groom as they grew into superstitions and locals got used to living in a town where the wealthy people clung to life just a little longer than they should and the undesired outsiders wound up dead in a ditch with a little booze splashed in their face and nobody got too stirred up when the really weird shit hit the fan.

"Of course you do," the Transylvanian said. He was practically purring by now. "Do you know anything about the history of this plant?"

I wrinkled my brow and then quietly but casually told him no. I flicked the finished cigarette over my shoulder, down the stairs. The floors were all tile here, it would go out before it started a fire. Or it wouldn't. I didn't much care either way.

"The floors that ran in darkness all the time, there was a spoken code for going around corners. 'Watch watch!' The workers would all say that when they were about to turn a corner. It was how they signaled one another so they wouldn't run into one another all the time. Walking down the halls, then, I'd hear that at every corner, say it at every corner, could hear it coming from other corners down other halls, a beehive of warnings flashing from one person to the next."

I sighed and kept walking. "Go ahead and spit out your tortured metaphor so we can get this over with," I said.

The Transylvanian allowed a small chuckle. "They - mortals - are like that. When there are unknown dangers, when something unknown and unknowable looms in the darkness, the shout warnings to one another. As you and your little friends in modern vampire society run around hiding behind the facades of legal identities and feeding in shadowed corners, they sense your presence. They sense that danger. They rush to investigate and then to warn one another. No, the better way is my way, where we build ourselves into the environment so that they have nothing special to fear from us. When you hide from them you still leave traces - a case of anemia that goes unexplained, a mysterious death, a scream heard drifting over the hills. You leave a blank spot in their view of the universe which the mortal mind yearns to fill. Look at how they live today, obsessed by fears known or otherwise. They create television channels that do nothing but tell them of new reasons to be afraid. They live in terror of terrorism. They live in angry fear of whole religions. On the rare occasion their leaders assert their cultural identity the mortal hordes quail and shudder and urge those leaders to back down after it's too late."

"And you and all your minions have fixed that?"

The voice was still leading me. We had walked up to the seventh floor and then down a darkened hallway only very dimly lit by an occasional red light fixture in a high corner. I could see

perfectly well by that but I could only imagine what it was like for human eyes, when the plant ran all the time, trying to navigate these halls by feel and, after enough years, memory. I could imagine them calling out this "watch, watch!" at every corner, warning others who might or might not be there that they were there, too. We had turned one of those corners and gone to a set of double doors that had CUTTER #9 on a large plaque on either door.

I pulled open the one on the right and stepped inside as the Transylvanian spoke again.

"We give them the solace of knowing what to fear." His voice was soft, almost wistful. "They know to fear the night, the darkness, and they have some idea of *why* they fear it - not a full conscious knowledge, nothing that would ever get printed, but enough subjective experience to come up with an explanation they can live with. We are the heart of their superstitions, their nightmares, but we are an old and careful race and they know, deep down, that their ancestors grew and thrived alongside us and if they behave themselves then so can they grow and thrive with us close at hand. They stop searching for what plagues their sleep and made those screams across the hills. They huddle together, yes, they find it unpleasant, yes, but they *stop searching for more to fear.*"

The room was pitch dark and my roiling shadows were of no use to me in here. I had my eyes as open as they could be but there simply wasn't any light here by which to see. I was as blind as a human in a tomb. I let the shadow dissipate from around me and could feel it unwind into threads and then nothingness. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my lighter, flicking it once or twice and squinting in advance to guard against the sudden brightness. When I got it lit, I very slowly opened my eyes and looked around. The machinery of the cutter, whatever that is, was dusty but intact. I doubted any part of it could move anymore, sitting without maintenance for years by this point, but it was an interesting arrangement of interlocking contraptions nonetheless. I looked around a bit in the room, taking a few steps this way and then that to peer around various mechanisms and into corners. Finally I found a small door marked MAINTENANCE CLOSET and pulled the door open. I could smell dead flesh on the other side as I did so and the light fell on two recent corpses, one male, one female, neither of them anyone I knew or especially cared about. They, I imagined, had served to slake the thirst of Clyde Junior after he was turned. The hunger in that moment is unbearable, the body's new need to feed at any cost. More than one maker has gotten taken out by their new spawn when they didn't have enough blood on-hand for that first feast and the newbie simply devoured their maker on the spot, having all the advantages of surprise. The kids in question usually died in short order, themselves, at another vampire's hands or from simple ignorance of things like sunlight or fire.

There was also a much older corpse, dessicated, like the natural mummy of that guy they dug up in the Alps a few years ago. He was wearing a fairly modern outfit, though, chinos and galoshes and a heavy sweater and oxford shirt. He'd had gloves on his hands but all I could see between the gloves and the sleeve of his sweater were exposed bones.

"The songchaser?" I said it aloud, though I hadn't heard much from the voice lately and so

for all I knew the Transylvanian had gone away or his power had faded or something like that.

The simple "yes" came from a few yards behind me and was delivered, I could tell, the Transylvanian himself. He was in the room. I was stunned I hadn't smelled him come in but maybe that was another part of this Last Breath ventriloquism he had going. I turned slowly.

"He was mortal."

"He was a hunter."

"A what?"

The Transylvanian smiled a little, hands in the pocket of his overalls. "A vampire hunter. We used to get them more than we do now. He was a vampire *hunter*. I could tell from the way he asked questions around town. Some of the people he talked to were loyal to me for one thing or another - a favor I'd done their family, a big buck I'd killed and brought and skinned and cleaned so their dear old grandmother would have something to eat in the winter, or the like. He wasn't asking about songs, he was asking about disappearances, deaths, strange occurrences. I hunted him and his helpers, his local *guides*, down and slew them to protect us all. You cannot possibly believe that's a bad thing."

I wrinkled up my brow at him. "So why all the charades about not being involved? Why keep his body here? None of that makes sense."

The Transylvanian favored me with a luxuriously slow shrug that happened entirely in his shoulders and neck; his hands never left his pockets. He didn't otherwise move, except to speak. "He was a trophy. I'd hunted the hunter and won. That victory was *mine* and no one else's. I saw no reason to share it with anyone else. This was my territory and I acted within my prerogative within my territory. No one else needed to know and no one else needed to share that victory with me."

"A trophy?"

The Transylvanian smiled a little in reply.

"Two things," I said, and I fished a cigarette out of a pocket and stuck it between my lips and lit it, in no great rush. "Thing One: keeping a mortal corpse around to look at as a reminder of your skill as a hunter? That's what sport hunters do, not food hunters. That's the most human thing ever. You like to think of yourself as this great and ancient evil but you kept the body around as a trophy? Christ, man, why didn't you just mount his stuffed head?" I started laughing all of a sudden, around my cigarette. A mortal would have wound up having an unpleasant coughing fit in that moment but a vampire, not so much. I pulled the cigarette out of my mouth, ashed with exquisite care in the middle of the fucking floor and then laughed again, long and loud. "Thing Two," I went on, "Is that your metaphor - simile, whatever - about the dark hallway and the mortals saying 'watch, watch?' That doesn't make any fucking sense, either. You, my friend are just super-attached to this idea of being the big, scary monster in the woods. That's what you get off on. I don't think it's really enough to call a philosophy or an ethos or anything, it's a *pose*. It is overt *posturing*. It doesn't hold up under the most cursory examination. You know why

those mortals walked around saying 'watch, watch?' Because they worked in a building with rooms named things like 'Cutter Number Fucking Four,' that's why. They were on high alert all the time and adopted systems of warning one another *because they knew they were in danger*. Yes, maybe you and your brood have conditioned a few specific areas or families to be accustomed to being in your presence. Do you think none of them will *ever* reject that? Do you think none of them will ever decide it's time to get that yoke from around their necks?

"You talk about their obsession with fear like it's a congenital condition, a race memory that comes from so far back they don't even know what silhouette they're seeking in the darkest part of the night and you're right with one salient point still incorrect: it's not us they fear. It's the older things than us, things older than humanity itself. You've pumped yourself up until you think you're the lion, the tiger *and* the bear all rolled into one. You think I and the rest of us modern vampires endanger humankind by living among them in secret? This isn't like being a gay guy and coming out of the closet to demand a little respect, mister. This is about being an alien presence and a dangerous foe and wanting humanity to have the opportunity to live out their lives with minimal interference or confrontation with us." I stopped yammering long enough to take one long drag and tap more ash out, my hands gesturing wildly as I talked, the cigarette zipping around in front of me.

"All you've done is create a greater chance that some individual human being will take it upon herself or himself to hunt us all down, you moron. You said it yourself, that your way is the 'old' way, that it is how things were done before vampires got organized and started setting rules and boundaries and recognizing one another's turf and you said yourself that back then there were *more* people who hunted us. I think that, really, is why you hide this 'trophy' away and try to make people think you didn't have anything to do with that murder. You got up on your high horse and went out and murdered three people and left two of their bodies to be discovered like the rest of Henderson or Transylvania or Buncombe Counties are populated by cave people who'd see those bodies and never go near that place again and what did it get you? A state cop obsessed with an unsolvable case for the rest of his life and a local deputy obsessed with a case when you dump the state cop's body in the same place after fifty-five years!

"Shit, man, look at their news channels you were talking about. What happens when they hear about something new to be scared of? They run it twenty-four-seven on those news channels and they enact a bunch of overreactive legislation and then they freak out when outlawing something or spying on themselves or trashing civil liberties doesn't make the problem go away. You claim to be the expert on human beings and to have elevated yourself above them with this thing you call a life and yet you're clueless about them despite acting just like one!"

I took another drag and flicked ash more fiercely this time and I could tell that the Transylvanian was starting to get pissed at me. He'd taken his hands out of that front pocket on his ridiculous overalls and cracked his knuckles one by one at his sides. I figured he was going to jump me while I was still talking so I drew another breath and kept going. "You've been out of

the game, out of human society, for way too long, man. You think they don't all carry cameras and telephones and video cameras in their pockets - and all of those are one device! Shit, do you even know what a video camera *is*?"

But I stopped talking then, because he had started to growl and so I flicked the still-lit cigarette straight at his face and leapt at him with my fangs out.

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Seventeen

I'm just so sick of wasting my time; love and death are always on my mind.

--The Stills, "Love and Death"

The Transylvanian wasn't completely ready for me but he'd had a long time to hone his physical skills. There was no light in this room and so my shadows could do me no good and I had only been able to see him when the lighter was lit so I had to hope he didn't just dive out of the way. He did me one better, sidestepping my flying tackle and swinging me around by one arm so that I went face-first into one of those big mechanisms, bashing my face against it. I could feel my nose crunch when he did it but I didn't give him a moment of leeway. I bounced off the machine, pushed some blood through my veins to give me all that strength we always have on tap and pushed away with my feet to plant my skull in his abdomen and send both of us flying the opposite direction across the room. He was slammed into the wall - I could hear his spine crunch a little - and all, what, four hundred pounds? of me sandwiched him there for a moment before he could push me away. I heard popping up and down his back as he healed - I was reknitting my nose already, myself - and he hauled back and landed a massive fist against my left temple as I tried to stand.

That sent me spinning around in a circle and rolling across the floor but I came up in a crouch as he started to charge after me. I drew a knife out of one boot and held it point-forward rather than some fancy anime style with it drawn facing out to the side. A vampire's skin can be hard if they're old and practiced and I suspected I would need all the force I could get on that point if I was going to puncture his hide.

We collided a moment later and I planted both feet on the floor and pushed the knife against his neck with all my weight. He scrabbled to try to pull me away, off of him, as my momentum overcame his and started pushing him backwards. I thought for a moment that the knife had found a way through his skin and I saw the tip disappear between folds of wrinkled flesh but I didn't smell any blood and pushing against him didn't suddenly get any easier. Finally I had scrabbled him back across the floor to the machine he'd smashed my face against and I pressed his head against it as I planted a boot on some other part of the machine for leverage and kept pressing the knife just as hard as I could. With a desperate snarl the Transylvanian tore a pipe or arm or something off that huge machine and swung it around to clock me good and hard on the *right* temple and send me flying.

As we both stood I reached inside my coat to produce a gun the size of a baby, or at least it always feels that way on the rare occasion I carry or use it. I don't remember what kind it is, one of the vampires down in Raleigh gave it to me as a present when I took over down there. I

never really knew what to think of that but right now I could have kissed old Seth on the lips for it. The Transylvanian started running towards me again and I started shooting, adjusting my aim as I caught a glimpse of him in the strobe effect of muzzle flare from each shot. In the light of the second shot I could see that I had not hit but I had improved my aim. The light of the third showed me that I had hit with the second. The light of the fourth showed me the third had also hit but I couldn't see blood anywhere on the Transylvanian. I kept hitting, guessing correctly to which side he would dodge between shots seven and eight, until finally he tackled me again and I had the gun against the side of his head, squeezing the trigger time and again in the second or two that we flew backwards through the air. Each muzzle flash showed me that the gun wasn't doing much more than bruising him where it hit and then getting slammed against the wall by him as repayment for tackling him myself knocked all the concentration out of me. It was all I could do to leap away and bound over the cutting machines built into the floor when he gave me a slight window by bouncing off all my fat when we hit the wall.

I reached into my coat on the other side and drew out a sawed off shotgun, then leapt back over the cutter and started firing silver pellets - a homemade mix I keep around in a few shells, just in case I run into a vampire with that unusual weakness. No dice, but the beads of birdshot were sufficiently tiny that I could see them cut his skin and draw blood in thin and perfectly straight lines across his face. He didn't like that at all and the way he roared back at me made me wonder for a second whether maybe he was vulnerable to silver after all. Still, a vampire who's vulnerable to silver goes down in a heap at the sight of the good flatware; a face full of two shells of bird shot would have them a heap of ash on the ground before the smoke cleared.

As he came at me I gritted my teeth and tossed the shotgun into the air, flipping it, and caught it by the still extremely hot barrel then spun in a circle and caught the Transylvanian across the nose with the stock like a perfect home run. I heard bones snap and shatter in his face and let the gun go so that it flew across the room and, more importantly, out of my hands. The would knit fast enough but that hurt like you wouldn't believe. I let the momentum of the spin carry me and on my second time around I put up one boot like a kung fu ballerina and caught the Transylvanian on the back of the head - the whack with the shotgun having spun him around - and heard bone give way to steel toes and felt his skull crack open. Something cold splashed out and hit me in the face and I could smell that it was his blood. There was another roar and he reached up to catch my boot in both hands and yank me off balance so that I went down in a sliding, sprawling heap and he tried to fall upon me.

I felt teeth graze my collarbone and something about that woke up every possible emergency reserve of panic in my system. Vampires don't operate much on our own hormones and such, what with all those glands getting shut down along with everything else, but the lizard brain is still back there doing its thing the whole time and all of a sudden I had to do whatever was necessary to keep this monster from drinking my blood until I was really and permanently

dead. I shot to my feet with him still wrapped around me and ran through the room and into another of these big-ass cutter machines. I don't think you realize how big they were, but they were the size of a full family sedan and built into the floor, with huge arms and levers and, somewhere one assumed, blades built into them. I slammed the Transylvanian into it so hard that I actually drove his fangs into my shoulder - not on a vein or an artery but piercing my flesh which, it turned out, didn't help so much with the panic.

Reaching down, I grabbed him around the waist by the belt loops of his overalls and simply lifted him up into the air and ripped his teeth away by spinning him around over me. His cries echoed around the room and I could feel and smell blood spattering onto me from the damage I'd done to his nose and the back of his head. He'd be healing already, I knew, and in what tiny part of me wasn't completely and senselessly terrified I knew I had to capitalize quickly on whatever advantage those wounds gave me. I couldn't see for shit, though, so I did the only thing I could think of: I slammed him head-first into the nest of equipment that comprised a cutter and then, praying to all the gods that might be listening that these devices lived up to their names, I started pushing so that I was driving him bodily farther and farther into this machine. I let go when he started kicking and caught me one in the eye and then started feeling around for anything that might be a lever or a button or anything I could use to make this machine work by my own hands.

I finally caught hold of something that seemed like a handle and I started working it up and down. This plant was highly automated, I could feel myself thinking from about a million miles away; there's no way these things had a hand-crank. They were probably really complicated to turn on, too, for safety's sake. So, I started running around it, yanking levers, mashing buttons, kicking it, cussing it, whatever it took, until finally I yanked too hard on part of it and felt a hose of some sort give way in my hand and foul, chemically sweet-smelling fluid started blurping out from whatever pressure remained in the line.

That fluid was apparently fairly important because I heard the machine start to creak. It wasn't that I had turned it on, it was that whatever nascent hydraulic pressure it had holding it still was all running out around my hand. There was a long, slow groan of metal, then another creak. The Transylvanian was still in there, screaming. It was easy to imagine his feet kicking like wild. The creak of metal turned into a shriek as something big and very heavy started to win out against that pressure that had held it up. The Transylvanian's shrieking became higher and then started to sound like gurgling and then stopped as the metal - what I assume was a or the blade - suddenly gave way and made a wet, thick sound like *SHLIRK* before clanging against whatever track or shield or groove it was made to rest in before being raised again.

The overwhelming smell of predator abruptly started to fade and in the darkness I could hear a new sound with my still hyper-active senses: the sound of dust - ash, even - sifting down through an old machine and settling in piles on the floor, like sand running over the metal of the equipment.

I dropped the hose, fumbled around for my lighter, lit it so that I could see and didn't even

take the time to congratulate myself after I confirmed what all that suggested. The Transylvanian was gone, dead, a blade having been run clean through him somewhere north of his belly button. Decapitation, as I think Roderick and I demonstrated in the bar, does not have to be a tidy affair in order to be effective.

I coughed a little as I drew a breath - I was sufficiently freaked out from having The Transylvanian's teeth touch my flesh that I was panting a little even though I don't have to breathe anymore - and sucked some of the swirling dust of the Transylvanian into my lungs. Turning, I used the lighter to find my knife, my guns, to pull an ancient dust rag from a work table off to one side and start wiping down all the places I saw the dust disturbed by a hand print or a boot print or the outline of a face.

By the time I was back outside and getting into my car, my nose was back to normal.

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Eighteen

Some say you're troubled, boy, just because you like to destroy.

--Franz Ferdinand, "The Fallen"

Roderick crept around the perimeter of the Shady Spot Assisted Living Estate. Despite the name, there were no trees immediately surrounding the small building - small for a hospital or rest home, anyway. It had room enough for a couple dozen small rooms and a small "living" room for the "guests" and a small kitchen where prepackaged meals could be reheated. Roderick smelled and saw all of this from the line of older trees that ran around the outside of the property. The building was probably thirty or forty years old. It had been built by cutting down all trees around it, then bulldozing it flat, then putting down grass seed and a building and leaving again. It was small and weak and it smelled terrible. Roderick would have gagged if that were still a possibility for his gastronomics, but it wasn't, so he didn't. He smiled at that terrible smell. He was going to help this place get better. It would have to, wouldn't it? When he was done?

Carla Van Buren didn't keep him waiting for very long. She would be a bad nurse, he thought to himself. She would be lax in her duties. She would hate these people, these mere mortal insects, on whom she waited hand and foot and waited for them to die and make her rich. Why she didn't simply kill them, well, Roderick couldn't fathom that. It simply made no sense. He had pondered this for a few minutes, maybe twenty, from inside the trees, when Carla came outside and lit her cigarette and started puffing on it.

Roderick had been very careful to stay downwind of the back yard of the building. Carla should not smell him. She did pull the cigarette from her lips and sniff the air a couple of times but no, she did not smell him.

She would already be running away or towards him if she did. Roderick smiled at this. He liked knowing things that were happening and how they should happen and being able to compare the two. It was remarkably more... He stumbled for a moment, in his mind, looking for a word.

Together, he thought. Yes, that was a good word for it.

He knew that something had happened when Withrow killed Clyde Junior. He did not know what, but he could guess. Withrow's shadows had been so strong when he'd returned, stronger than Roderick had ever seen them. Roderick wondered what would happen when he drank all of Carla Van Buren's blood, so that she were dead? He would need to make sure that she did not cry out or attract attention, so the butcher knife would need to be held at just the right height and position to disable her voice without cutting her head off. Roderick lifted the awful thing he'd gotten from the kitchen of his hotel after sweet-talking some adorable little room service waiter out of it and held it just below his own shoulder's height. That should just about do it.

Carla Van Buren was standing there, smoking her cigarette, worried that she hadn't heard from Blaine or any of the others at the meeting. She skipped the meeting because Mr. Wilson was in a bad way. She had to watch him very carefully these days to keep him alive. She could always have put him in better health but she liked walking that fine line, the balancing act between breath and the grave. Besides, when she used her gift it felt... wrong. It felt like something was coming out of her that shouldn't, like she shouldn't be able to do something "good" like that. Of course, she'd given up on things like right and wrong, good or bad a long --

She did not see who sped past her in a blur but she did feel her throat gape open with a ragged wound. She put her hands to her neck and tried to scream but nothing would come out except a wheeze of air.

Roderick shot past Carla, felt the knife bite down and then break free and kept going. At the tree line he held out one arm and wrapped it around a tree trunk to swing around and face Carla again. Her hands had just started going up to her neck and he watched to make sure she didn't scream.

She didn't.

Roderick shifted his position, planted his feet against the tree trunk and then shot back through the air towards her by pure momentum so that he tackled her to the ground, tumbled head-over-heels with her for three lengths and then came up so that he was on her back and her face was buried against the ground.

"My cousin does not take kindly to such permissive definitions of territory and loyalty," Roderick whispered. "I apologize for what is about to happen but look at it this way: I could have been much, *much* nastier."

Then Roderick sank his teeth into her throat and took his time with it.

It was amazing. When he was done he knew two things he had not: that vampires have souls - for he had just eaten one, he knew this deep in his being - and that he could do more than just read a person's thoughts thanks to this Last Breath; he could hear *lots* of people's thoughts. As Carla turned to dust and ash and began to drift away in the breeze he stood and closed his eyes and learned that he could stretch the reach of his perception out to all of the minds in the rest home and even, he learned after some prodding, reach into them to alter them through direct intervention.

They were in such pain. That didn't bother Roderick, though; what tugged at him was their powerlessness, so badly that he started to shut them off one at a time. It didn't take long and when he was done he smiled.

The silence was exquisite.

Roderick took a moment to review his plans for the rest of the evening. He had hours and hours before sunrise. Withrow was off to face the Transylvanian. There were three vampires he knew of in Western North Carolina, other than himself, and by dawn there would only be two. He

wondered which two they would be.

Marty Macintosh proved to be quite easy to find. Roderick drove around the apartment complex with the window down, frigid winds carrying the scent of another vampire to him. He stopped his car, got out and let his mind reach out to touch all the others around him. These he didn't shut off, though the temptation was there. All the souls in that little rest home, every one of them, were so weak and small; these were mostly vibrant and alive. He wondered how hard they would be to snuff out, how difficult it would be to simply turn off the parts that made hearts beat and lungs breathe. He did not allow himself this small experiment however.

Well, only once. It was very easy.

Roderick smiled a little, to himself, like a kid with a stolen candy bar in his pocket.

Marty answered his door after Roderick had knocked three times and then reached into Marty's mind and shouted profanities for a moment. That had been fun. Marty had run to the door and flung it open and gawped at Roderick standing there, leaning against the door jam, looking as casual as Saturday afternoon. Marty welcomed him in.

"I am the cousin of Withrow Surret, the boss of this state," Roderick said with absolutely zero otherwise in the way of niceties. "My name is Roderick Surret. Withrow has allowed me the honor of assisting him in the eradication of the minions of the vampire you know as The Transylvanian." Roderick watched Marty's face closely for signs of trouble. His perceptions hovered near Marty's mind but he didn't allow himself to dive in. Roderick wished to see if he could do this on his own.

"You're here to kill me." Marty's voice was small and terrified and resigned and, Roderick knew, a little glad.

"Heavens no," Roderick said with a chuckle. "I'm here to ask you if you would like to be adopted and protected."

Marty blinked his wide eyes once, then again.

"If I take you as mine, my cousin will not harm you." Roderick smiled still but it was growing a little brittle. He had been unaware Marty might require a visual aid to comprehension. "I am offering you that."

"Why?"

"Because you helped my dear cousin in his quest," Roderick purred. The smile was a little more natural now. "Because I wish to see you spared unnecessary harm. You tried to do what you could against the progenitor's sway the Transylvanian would hold over you. You also have useful skills. My time in this city is not at an end and I will need a great deal of assistance completing the work that remains to me."

"The maps." Marty was no great conversationalist and Roderick was already kind of tired of this.

"Yes. I wish you to map things for me. Notice things for me. Warn me of things. Assist me in identifying targets." Roderick licked his lips and fought back the temptation just to sniff at

Marty's thoughts, see what motivations were at war with one another in his mind. "Do you accept? You will only have these moments in which to consider it. If you do not accept then I will eliminate you without pain or suffering. If you do accept you will be protected and taught how to live in vampire society. If you accept and then betray me then I will kill you in some way that causes great anguish, starting with your mind."

"This can't be about maps." Marty simply said it, like the most obvious thing in the world.

Roderick sighed softly. "Because I need to sandwich myself somewhere between burdensome and helpful. I am soon going to be making a request of my cousin. It will help me if he sees me as more responsible."

"Mr. Surrett," Marty finally said, "You're not going to tell him about me one way or the other, are you?"

I shrugged at him.

Marty blinked again, more rapidly. "I accept, Mr. Surrett," he said.

Roderick smiled and withdrew his perceptions entirely before holding out one hand to shake. "A pleasure to meet you, Marty Macintosh. Please, call me Roderick."

Tooth and Nail - Chapter Nineteen

You have to make this life liveable.

--Depeche Mode, "Strangelove"

Roderick and I sat on the back porch at my place, with Smiles curled up beside me on the floor, me in my great big papasan chair and Roderick in a rocker, his legs crossed at the knees, a handheld gaming thing in his hand, earphones in, and me with my little pocket Sudoku gadget. We'd sat that way for a long time, when I came back home from killing the Transylvanian and found Roderick already back there, plugged in, tuned out. I had joined him in silence, with nothing more than a glance between us and a smile on Roderick's face when we exchanged that look.

Finally I got frustrated working on an 8x8 that I just couldn't figure out and turned it off and lit a cigarette. Roderick tinkered with his game for another thirty seconds or so and then I saw him close it up and take the earphones out of his ear.

"You're alive," he said, that same weird little smile of his returning. "Tell me everything."

So, I did.

Actually, that's not true. For reasons I couldn't quite suss out at the time, I didn't tell him about the necklace or the bracelet I'd left with H'Diane. I don't know why, I just left it out. It took a while to tell him about the Transylvanian, about his obsessive narcissism that led him to build a cult of personality around the flimsiest of fake philosophies I'd ever heard.

When I was done, Roderick sat and looked out over the back yard for a few minutes and so did I. Finally he turned back to me and lit a cigarette of his own. "So what now?"

"I don't know. I need to find the rest of the Transylvanian's brood but I don't even know who they are or how many they are. Sure, we got told a number by that one we did up in Asheville but he was probably conditioned to lie about it."

Roderick nodded and sighed. "Does that mean you're going home to Raleigh? Are you just going to visit more?"

There was something in the way Roderick asked that question which caused me to shut my mouth again after I started to give a simple answer. I let it sit there for a few seconds and then I opened my mouth again. "I guess."

"Hmmm." He just made a little noise like that and then Roderick looked away again.

"Why? What's it to you?"

"I have..." Roderick smiled again, still not looking at me. "I have an idea. A... proposal."

I hrmphed and crossed my arms but waited for him to keep going.

"I would like you to give Asheville to me. I would like to stay here and keep hunting the

Transylvanian's minions. I would respect your authority over the state but Asheville would be my jurisdiction. I would use it as a base from which to patrol the western mountains and search out more of the Transylvanian's spawn. I would report to you on a regular basis but I would have a great deal of power to use my own discretion in matters related to the Transylvanian's spawn so that I might decisively act when I encounter one of them." Roderick turned and looked back at me, smiling weirdly again.

"I..." That was a genuine stunner. I didn't really see Roderick as being the middle-management type, you know? Were things that bad for him in Seattle? He and Emily got along just fine up there and she saw me as a peer so if she'd had a problem with him she would mention it to me even if he didn't. "Why?"

Roderick thought that one over for another minute or two while we smoked in silence. Finally, he replied. "Agatha, your maker, has offered me a role as one of her lieutenants."

"Agatha *what?* Tried to hire you?"

"Yes. I haven't yet given her my answer. I've lived long enough in Seattle. My twilight came and went decades ago. I have no reason to stay there and everything to gain from moving somewhere the talent pool is a little more sparse. I wish to do that under your tutelage but I'll take what I can get." Roderick swiveled his eyes around and stared at me, no smile on his lips any longer. "Do you accept?"

I had to think about it. I knew the smart thing would be to sleep on it and see how I felt in the morning but there was no time, I could tell. "Give me five minutes," I said, and I got up and walked inside to pace the living room while I thought it over.

Three minutes later I went back onto the porch, Roderick hunched over his game again. He closed it after a few seconds, yanked out the earphones and then set them all aside so he could turn the rocking chair and look at me without distraction or movement.

"You would be loyal to me?"

"I would submit to you as a knight to his leige. You would be the ruler of this state but I would be your deputy in Asheville and its surroundings. I would act to enforce and represent your rule."

"Once we find all of the Transylvanian's brood I doubt there will be any vampires to whom you would represent it." I didn't have my arms crossed anymore and I sat forward, elbows on knees, Smiles awake and snuffling at my shoes.

"Perhaps, but perhaps not."

I squinted at him but I couldn't read his mind any more than he could mine. Finally I sighed. "And if I don't?"

"I go to work for Agatha, yes, but not against you if trouble ever broke out. I would simply find it preferable to living in Seattle like nothing's ever changed, anywhere or to anyone. You, meanwhile, are left without a helper in Asheville and the Transylvanian's minions retire to lick their wounds and plan for revenge. You'd be dead before you knew it." Roderick was so matter-of-fact,

so sane, it made me shiver a little. "There's also the matter of your own soul and future to consider."

I blinked at that. "What?"

"You, your future, who you are." Roderick licked his lips, perhaps unaccustomed to speaking this much all at once with so much *presence* in a conversation. "If you just act like none of this ever happened, what will you turn into? You'll turn into the Transylvanian. Not literally or anything, not at first, not for a long time, not in every way but you would recede from the world. You must choose, right here and now, to accept that you are giving up a little control over your surroundings to someone you are choosing to trust. You must be a little vulnerable in some way so that you can still be a little *human*. Cousin Withrow, that is what makes vampires become the Transylvanian: an unwillingness to let life happen around them, a desire for predictability, the urge to leave nothing to chance. We are strong and fast and we get weird little powers and we turn all of them, in time, to control over the world around us. We try to stop the passage of time because it's so meaningless and terrible from our perspectives and that's when we become the monsters. You must give up some of your power, give up some of your surety, so that you can live like a human does in some way. I am offering you that, right now. I offer you a chance at uncertainty so that you can still be alive inside."

I sat in dumbfounded silence and turned that over in my mind. Roderick watched me very closely as I turned to look at the yard myself, to sit and reflect and consider. Finally, I spoke. "Where would you live?"

"I would buy a place, or rent a nice condo. I have money, that's not the issue."

"When would it go into effect?"

"As soon as I could have the movers take everything from Seattle and bring it here; that should take about four days."

"You've already been calling around, haven't you?"

Roderick smiled again and shrugged. "Covering my bases."

"Okay," I finally said. "You've got a deal." I held out my fat, sausage hand to shake and Roderick took it in his tiny little hand and that was that. I ceded to him all the control I had just fought hand-to-hand, fang and fur, to assert.

Roderick smiled again, only a little sadly. "Now, the first request of your new lackey? Visit more often. Once every five years is not enough. You cannot keep up with what's going on. Shoot for once a year, if not every six months."

"Why? Aren't you going to be my eyes and ears here?"

"Because," Roderick said, shaking his head a little at me, "I would like to see you more."

I left the next night. Roderick saw me off from the house. He was staying there while he looked for a place of his own. He knew a fixer from Seattle who could take care of his property there and the arrangements with a moving company. He also has a human servant - a butler,

believe it or fucking not - who was going to take care of a lot of the daytime shit. In the meantime, he was reading real estate ads. If I knew him at all, he would wind up with one of those water-guzzling, overpriced mega-mcmansion things I hated so much. That's just how he is; no sense of tradition.

I've thought, ever since then, that maybe I should have told Roderick about H'Diane and the bracelet and the necklace, but I *still* haven't told him. I've never even hinted at it. I'm not sure why that is, but I guess it comes down to feeling like I've still got a card face-down on the table. I sincerely hope that they never run into one another and freak out one another but I am not quite ready to leave my cousin alone in Asheville with absolutely nothing there to serve as a counterweight.

On my drive back I stopped in Greensboro to pay a social call on Sara. She wasn't thrilled at the idea that someone would have Asheville and all its surroundings all to themselves, but I got her to stop focusing on that and start focusing on the Transylvanian. She'd keep her eye out, she said. She wrinkled up her brow in a funny way when I told her what he'd said, the way he kept talking about *before* territories and allegiances. I didn't press the issue but I could practically see by the way she went blank every now and again after I mentioned that, standing perfectly still and her eyes flicking around, that some part of her was erasing any mention of those *before* times every time I brought them up.

I made a mental note to call Agatha and ask her when I got home but I never did. I just sort of forgot about it until now. I should call her tonight. On the other hand, writing all this down has kind of taken it out of me. Maybe a day of sleep would be good, clear my head, make me better able to focus on it all.

Eh, we'll see.

Tooth and Nail - Epilogue

Say goodbye on a night like this.

--The Cure, "A Night Like This"

I was high in a tree overlooking the revelers while they danced around a bonfire. The cultists in question were a bunch of kids from the local high schools, mostly dressed in heavy metal t-shirts whose rebellious messages were otherwise denied by the clean-cut appearances of fresh faces with Sunday morning hair. These were rich kids who were playing at being Satanists. Roderick had ginned up the idea that maybe they had a local patron playing the part of El Diablo - a vampire left over from the Transylvanian's brood - and though I found it unlikely I was willing to take a shot at finding out.

That's why Roderick had let himself be "found" snooping around the campsite earlier that night so that the kids took him prisoner and tied him to a big rock nearby before they started their chanting and dancing. They were rocking out pretty hard to the mountains' only *a capella* version of *Welcome to the Jungle* while I watched, getting more and more certain this had been a waste of time. The kids were all building towards something and I figured if they had a vampiric patron they wouldn't start the ecstatic frenzy without him. Besides, I didn't smell anybody around other than the kids and Roderick so I knew there was no third vampire in the area. These kids were playing dress-up. I started to gather myself into a coil when they reached their climax and one of them turned and abruptly drove a knife into the center of Roderick's chest.

Well I'll be damned, I thought, High school kids willing to do a human sacrifice.

Roderick's eyes rolled back in his head and his lids fluttered and he stopped his endless pleading for mercy.

The group fell silent and the one who'd done the stabbing stood there with his hand still wrapped around the hilt. "You did it," one of them said, very quietly.

"We did it," the kid corrected them. He was bigger than the rest - most of them boys but I had counted five girls among the thirteen of them.

One of the boys fainted dead away, right there on the spot.

"Will he come now?" The voice that asked this was shaking like a leaf.

"Let's start the chant and find out," the leader replied.

All that had me interested enough to keep watching. Maybe they did have a patron but he made them bring him a victim and do a special secret dance before he'd show himself. Maybe he was downwind of me and I just didn't know he was there. A lot of 'maybe' situations arose in my mind so I just kept watching from thirty or forty feet above them. They did some more chanting but this time it was short and clearly only the leader had practiced it. I could practically hear him

thinking that the rest of them were half-hearted wimps for never having enough faith in themselves to bother learning the actual summoning incantation.

They chanted it once, then stood tensed and nervous. Then they did it again. Then again.

Then I dropped down out of the tree and right in front of the leader, facing the fire, my back to him.

"WHO DARES TO SUMMON THE GREAT WITHULHU!" I'd taken a bunch of really deep breaths to stretch my diaphragm and get more air in my lungs so that I could bellow with the best of them after I landed. I whipped around and took their leader by the throat. *"WHO DARES TO CALL ME WITHOUT STRIKING A BARGAIN FIRST?"*

The leader kid's eyes went as wide as saucers and he, too, fainted. By the time I turned around the eleven who were conscious and on their feet were screaming and running down the hill, through the Pisgah National Forest, back towards cars they had parked haphazardly on the sides of access roads no one was supposed to drive after dark. I thought about chasing them but I didn't. My point, I figured, had been made.

Roderick snapped the ropes that had seemed to hold him in place and yanked the knife out of his chest. "You know, dear cousin," he sighed, "A sternum wound is particularly painful."

"You'll knit it up and not compalin," I said, lighting a cigarette. "This was your idea, after all."

"Ah well," he sighed. "I'll find the rest of the Transylvanian's brood eventually, I'm sure. And besides, we did have a bit of fun, didn't we? 'Withulhu?' I didn't even know you liked the classics."

"You read anything when it's the dead of winter and the nights are long and you're bored," I said. "Well, let's go on home. These two will wake up in their own time. I expect Daddy's Little A-Listers all gave up the Satanism gig about thirty seconds ago."

Roderick laughed a little at the leader, still prone and unconscious, breath shallow, and then so did I, and eventually we were chucking each other on the upper arms and cackling like old hens as we made our way down to our own cars stashed in other places from the kids'.

H'Diane and Lavonde were sitting at home watching a DVD of a show they'd both missed when it aired a few years before. H'Diane wasn't that into it but LaVonde was and H'Diane didn't want to be the downer. During a break between episodes, she got up and went into the bathroom and stopped halfway to the toilet when all of a sudden the pendant around her neck *ached*.

It hadn't done that in a year, since the night Clyde Junior had been found dead.

The night the shadows had talked to her.

She stopped, turned around, walked into the bedroom through the other door into the bathroom and grabbed her gun and her badge from the nightstand. Quietly, she walked back up the hall, crouched and peeked into the living room.

A latino guy of thirty-five or forty had LaVonde by both arms and had his mouth open,

grotesquely long canines dripping with saliva, ready to bite the neck of the woman H'Diane loved.

Without thinking, without a moment's hesitation, she stood and pointed the gun and shot him in the mouth so that his jaw shattered and blood and gore splattered the wall behind him. He made a noise, a horrible noise sort of like a strangled growl, and tossed LaVonde aside to come straight for H'Diane. All she could do was throw her arms up over her face at the last second.

The guy touched her arm, touched the bracelet, and screamed bloody murder, flinging himself backwards, away from H'Diane, away from LaVonde, towards the front door. H'Diane stared for a second as he scabbled with smoking hands at the door knob, trying to get away, then raised the gun again and shouted that he was under arrest.

He didn't comply, and he was clearly dangerous, so she pulled the trigger.

One shot, two shots, both directly in the abdominal region precisely as her training dictated, a third shot that caught him in the right temple so that his brain pan blew out across the door.

Three seconds later there was a pile of ash settling on the floor and the bits of bone and flesh that had sprayed around were simply gone in little puffs of dust.

After that, H'Diane never went anywhere without her bracelet and pendant, never took them off except to bathe and even then would simply switch the bracelet from one wrist to the other so that she could wash where it had been on her arm. Whatever those were - and she and LaVonde had talked about it many times without either of them being willing to state their theories or that they even had one but they both knew what it was, they *knew*, there was only one thing they'd ever seen turn to ash when it died and they'd seen that only in movies or on TV, but there it had been, *they had seen it* - wherever it had come from, it had been a year to the night since Clyde Wilfred, Jr., was discovered dead in his back yard by H'Diane and his body had disappeared from the morgue six hours later.

H'Diane knew that whatever it was thought she had killed Clyde Junior and that it wanted revenge.

They would never, ever have it from her, she told herself. Not as long as she lived.

Never.

After all, now she knew where to aim the *first* bullet.