

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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A close-up photograph of a hand firmly gripping a weathered wooden stake. The stake is positioned vertically against a red brick wall. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the wood and the skin of the hand. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the hand and the stake.

pulling
up
stakes

First love can
really suck.

Pulling Up Stakes

A Tale of Relenting Horror

PART ONE OF TWO

Peter David



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First edition

One

My Dumb Ass Situation With My Mother

“Wake up. It’s time to go out and kill something.”

I moaned softly and pulled my blanket over my head.

“*Vincent!*” said my mother, Dina Hammond, and this time she reached down and shook me so violently that I was sure my teeth were rattling. “Vince, for God’s sake! You haven’t got all night!”

My head poked out from underneath the blanket like a turtle from its shell and I looked at her with bleary eyes. “I’m actually pretty sure that I do.”

“Oh good. You’re alive.” My mother frowned in concern. “You’ve been sleeping through a lot of days lately.”

“Well, I’ve been working nights.”

“Let me check.”

“Oh, Mom, for God’s sake—”

“Let me. Check.” There was no waffling in Mom’s tone; nothing that indicated that there was going to be any wiggle room in the discussion or any possible negotiating of terms. You’d think I was fourteen instead of twenty-four. Although admittedly my room hadn’t changed much since my teen years, with the same rock music posters clinging to the wall even though the bands had either broken up or gotten totally ass. There wasn’t much clutter because Mom tended to be like a python on a titmouse about such things, although I was lousy about remembering to hang up my weapons or secure my guns. They lay on the shelves, out and open and loaded. But it wasn’t like we had kids in the house, unless you counted me.

“Go. Away.” I retreated back under the black, scratchy blanket.

“Vince, damn it, I’m not screwing around any...” Her voice trailed off. Then, very coolly, she said, “Okay. Do what you want. Stay in bed. Waste your nights the way you waste your days. That’s perfectly fine by me.”

“Excellent,” I said.

I remained where I was, hoping against hope that that would be the end of it. It was less than a minute later that I realized I should have known better.

That was how long it took for Mom to creep back into my bedroom, yank my blanket off my prostrate form, and shove a crucifix at my face, holding it an inch or so away.

I stared up at the large silver religious icon with a dead Jew immortalized in silver. I knew it all too well. It was my mother’s, and had been her mother’s before her, and before her, and so on and so on going back five, six, or seven generations. It was hard to be sure; my mother’s story kept changing, depending on the point she was trying to make and how much she had had to drink. “Hey, look. I found Jesus.”

Mom said nothing; her lower lip simply curled more intently as she waited to see if there would be some reaction from her son other than my being a smart ass.

“Seriously,” I said, “the guy’s been found more than Waldo. You know what Jesus needs? A Lojack. Then finding him would be way easier.” When she didn’t so much as crack a smile, I tapped the crucifix with my finger like a dying comedian. “Is this thing on?”

“All right, all right,” said Mom, withdrawing the crucifix.

“Or maybe Jesus could use a GPS so he wouldn’t keep getting lost in the first place and everyone wouldn’t have to keep looking for him.”

“You win, all right?” said Mom. “You’re not turning. You’re just a bum. Happy?”

“Ecstatic.” But I knew that going back to sleep wasn’t really an option, especially since Mom was continuing to stand there, glowering at me. Bowing to the inevitable, I sat up and set my stocking feet onto the floor.

“Since when do you wear pajamas?” said my mother.

“Since you started coming into my room and waking me up all the damned time...ow!”

That last exclamation came as a result of my mother’s having grabbed a fistful of my shaggy black hair and pulled back on it. “Ow! Mom, what the hell!?”

“Just double checking.” She studied my neck with expertise born of years of practice, checking with a mirror for extra certainty. She did it so casually that she might have been a concerned mother inspecting her son’s head for signs of a tick, instead of my throat for twin puncture marks.

“Waving Jesus in my face wasn’t enough?”

“I’m also trying to prove a point.”

“What point? That you’re a paranoid nut job?”

“That long hair can be your enemy.” She released her hold and I rubbed the back of my head. “That’s how that blonde stake-slinger bought it. One of those bastards grabbed her from behind, yanked hard, ripped her head off, and that was that for her.”

A stake slinger was the derisive term Body Men used to describe anyone who did what we did but wasn’t part of the proud order of the Chevaliers de Sang. The Knights of the Blood.

“Thanks, Mom. That was exactly the mental image I needed to kick off the day...night,” I corrected myself.

“I’m just trying to keep you alive. I wouldn’t be doing my job if I weren’t trying that.” She gently prodded me with the end of her cane. “Get the point?”

“I get it, I get it. Happy?”

“Never.” The depressing thing was, she said that with all seriousness and meant it. “Now get dressed. I’ve gotten reports of a possible nest.”

“Aw God.” I moaned. “Another one?”

“They’re like cockroaches.”

“Yeah, well, scientists say cockroaches could survive nuclear holocaust, so I’m not loving our odds.”

She slapped me on the shoulder. “Get dressed, come downstairs, and I’ll go over the map.”

My mother turned away from me then and headed out the

door. As always, it took her a while to get there. The metal prosthetic that extended from out her right trouser leg afforded her balance, but not speed. I listened until the “clack-clack” of my mother’s slow, measured step had receded and then I got out of bed.

I went into my bathroom and threw water on my face. After that I took a fast shower and then layered on the anti-perspirant, brushed my teeth assiduously and practically chugged the mouthwash.

I pulled on a pair of black cargo pants with plenty of pockets because that was what my line of work demanded, and a black t-shirt over my head that stuck to my still-wet chest. I emerged from the room and the smell of hamburgers grilling wafted up the stairs to me. I managed to steady myself after a minute, forced a smile, and trotted down the stairs.

Mom had just removed the burger from the grill. “I ate already, if that’s okay with you,” she said.

I shrugged. “Whatever,” I said indifferently.

Mom tossed the burger carelessly onto a roll and placed it in front of me with a handful of potato chips piled on next to it. For Mom, that was a gourmet meal. The truth was, she was an indifferent cook. Dad was the gourmet in the family. Damn, I missed him.

I ate the burger resolutely, almost stoically. My mother looked at me askance. “Something wrong with it?”

“No, it’s great,” I lied.

“So,” and Mom pulled a large black binder down from an overhead shelf. “The nest.”

“Right, right. The nest.” I put the remains of the burger aside. “What’ve we got?”

Mom sat down opposite me and flipped open the notebook. There was a copious list of dates, times, suspected movements. All of it was courtesy of an extended network called “questers.” They were one step down from actual “cavaliers,” which was technically the rank that Mom and I held. (Or at least it was the rank that Mom held before the accident that had rendered it impossible for her to go out into the field.)

But no one actually used the term “cavaliers” anymore. A

more vernacular term had sprung up and been embraced by most of the newer generation: “Body Men,” because when the bodies start piling up, we’re the ones who come in to deal with it. Our elders had resisted the term at first and still refuse to acknowledge it officially, but they use it now, too.

Mom ran her fingers down the list of spottings and said, “Here. In the general vicinity of Broadway and Austin, between 10th and 30th. A body was found there, with the marks. A young girl. Tracy Manor. Five eight, brown hair, about a hundred twenty pounds. And if there’s one,” she said darkly, “there are sure to be more.”

“Mom, that’s...” I pulled out a map and unfolded it on the table. “That’s a forty block radius.”

“Give or take.”

“And most of those buildings are pretty run down. A lot of them are abandoned.”

“Exactly!” said Mom triumphantly. “The precise sort of place where vampires would be holding up.”

“Still, that’s a lot of territory to cover—”

“You can bring some questers with you. Have them help narrow the search...”

“No, no, it’s okay,” I said quickly. “They’ve done their job. Now I have to do mine.” I shrugged in a resigned way. “That’s just, y’know...what we do. What we *did*. What *I* do.”

“Vince...it’s okay.” She rested a hand on mine. “I’m not oversensitive about the leg. I mean, yes, it was horrible when it happened, but I know my stalking days are over now. You’re out there for the both of us. And when it’s your turn to bring a child into the world, you’ll train him or her in our line of work. These things go in cycles. It’s your turn now and I don’t resent that. I cherish it.”

“Me too, Mom,” I said tiredly. Somehow it just didn’t seem worth worrying about or, at the very least, discussing. Then I looked at her kind of sideways and said, “The body they found. She was drained?”

She checked her notes. “No,” and she sounded a little surprised. “Funny that they’d waste food like that.”

“Yeah. Hysterical.”

I suited up for the gig. Mom smiled as I strapped on the night vision goggles; she was a big fan of those. Under my black leather jacket I had my twin .45s, my preferred firearms because I'd grown up on the Shadow and the Phantom and shit like that and so I just felt like having twin .45s strapped across my chest was about as cool as it got. Silver bullets, of course. I had a cell phone fully charged in case I got into trouble, with a direct number I could call that would ring at the central headquarters for the Garrison.

I had my special stake securely tucked into its sheathe and made sure to hold it up so Mom could see it right before I headed into the garage. My cycle was waiting for me, an antique Harley, made back in the days when men were men, vamps were vamps, and cycles were cycles. I tapped the garage door opener and once the door slid up with its usual normal rattle, I roared out into the night. The night air blew my hair around like a son of a bitch, which was fine because there was nothing especially cool about wearing a helmet and I tried to avoid it whenever possible. Plus it's not as if I really needed it.

You might think that Body Men would operate together in one vast pack since we were all tight with each other. But the members of our particular division of the Chevaliers, Garrison Thirteen, (lucky number, I know) tended to operate as loners or in small groups at most. Getting a group of Body Men to agree on the best method of attack was typically like herding cats. I'd heard that some Garrisons managed it, and they could mount astoundingly devastating raiding parties. For the most part, though, the Body Men in our local Garrison tended to do our own thing, share up information as needed, and call for help if we suddenly found ourselves in over our heads. Of course, on those occasions that we *were* in over our heads, chances were that we'd be dead before there was an opportunity for backup to arrive. In any event there was no reason to start dragging questers into tonight's festivities.

It wasn't as if I didn't know where to go.

I made it over to the target area in short order, turned onto Broadway, and glided up the street until I reached 37th, then hung a right. Within minutes I had parked the Harley in an

alleyway, locked it down, and set the alarm. Then I made my way down the alley, having no trouble seeing in the dark. I stepped over a random bum who looked up at me with bleary eyes and seemed too far-gone even to ask me for some money.

There was another, though, who had a bit more life to him. "Hey, fella," he said, and he held out his hand for money without even bothering to say what it was he wanted. It was pretty obvious. I tried to step around him but he actually had the nerve to grab at my leg.

I turned and drew back my lips, displaying my fangs while growling low in my throat. I sounded like an angry panther, or at least to my own mind I did. In real life I probably sounded more like a Volkswagen that needed a tune-up. For good measure I let my eyes go red, which hurts like a son of a bitch when you do it, but is good for effect if you want to really creep somebody out. It worked great in this case as the guy fell back, yanking his hands free from me and sputtering something that I couldn't make out and certainly didn't care enough to worry about.

Without giving him any more thought, I walked toward a solid metal door in the middle of the alleyway. The door and the wall were covered with graffiti, but if you listened, you could hear the steady throb of music coming from the other side. I rapped on the door three times.

A small window situated in the upper section of the door slid open. I saw a pair of gleaming red eyes peering through.

"Joss sent me," I said.

"You're hilarious," came an annoyed voice from the other side. "Name?"

"Vince."

"Vince who?"

"Vince I'm Gonna Kick Your Ass if You Don't Open This Door."

The guy on the other side sounded less than impressed. "Your name ain't on the list."

I closed my eyes and sighed softly to myself. "Tell Duncan that I'm here."

"That you're here."

"Yeah."

“And your name?”

“*Vince, dickweed!*”

The little window slid shut again. I was tempted at that point to just rip the door off the hinges. Certainly I had the strength to do it. But this was Duncan’s nest and I didn’t see any reason to be a jerk about it, even if I was trying to do them a solid and they were busy acting like assholes.

A couple of minutes passed like an hour. I felt a wave of nausea seizing me that I couldn’t resist, so maybe it was better that the guy at the door was being kind of a dick. I walked to the other side of the alley, allowed my stomach to do its business, and a few seconds later Mom’s burger was decorating the floor of the alley. My mouth felt dry and I licked my lips. Then I looked down. A rat ran over my foot. I grabbed it, sucked it dry before it even had a chance to squeal, and then tossed it aside. It made me feel a little better, helping to cleanse my pallet, as it were.

The things we do to avoid upsetting our mothers.

Chapter 2.

My Visit To Moveable Feast Gets Totally FUBARed

I heard the bolt being shot at the door and it swung open. The bruiser at the door stood there with his shoulders hunched and a face that looked like soggy Gouda, both in color and consistency. “Enter freely and of your own will,” he said which is, y’know, what we typically say.

There’s a myth, by the way (God knows there’s so many of them) that we can’t enter places if we’re not invited. It’s bullshit. Vampires used to be gentlemen, you see. Landed gentlemen, and frequently titled as well. An elite club of bloodsuckers. And they were polite, okay? It’s really no more involved than that. If you’ve a shred of decency, training and class, you don’t enter someone’s house without being invited because, well, it’s rude. That’s all. Just fucking rude. They were vampires, not monsters. So they would wait to be invited in. Which isn’t to say they couldn’t kick down your door and stomp in if you told them to go screw themselves, but they wouldn’t, because they were gentlemen. Bram Stoker got a ton of stuff wrong, and it may be kind of hard for modern audiences to wrap themselves around why women thought Bela Lugosi was swoon-worthy, but what he nailed was the elegance, charm and old world sensibility that once was common place, but now not so much.

People used to be classier, is all I’m saying. And vampires were the classiest.

Anyway, I walked in at cheese face’s invitation. “Thanks loads,” I said to him as he pulled the door shut.

He stared at me levelly and then held up a box of Tic-Tacs.

I looked at them suspiciously. "You got rat on your breath," he said.

Yes, we have breath, in case you were wondering. I don't get how people can think on the one hand that vampires don't breathe, and then on the other hand, they watch them on TV or in movies smoking a cigarette, or talking for that matter since you need air to produce sounds. It's not that we can't expel air; we just don't *have* to breathe. We just do it because we're used to it. Just like our hearts, which beat because we're accustomed to it. Most of the rest of our internal organs tend to atrophy pretty quickly, though. When was the last time you felt your spleen working? Or your liver? See what I'm saying?

I was tempted to tell cheese face to go screw himself and his mints, but, well, I *had* just sucked down rat. So reluctantly I gave a nod of thanks, took two breath mints and popped them in my mouth.

The music was pounding and bodies were gyrating on the dance floor as I made my way toward the back room, the DJ bouncing around like a lunatic at the far side of the room. The large room was almost blacked out, with stray red spotlights strobing through the place for atmosphere. It was a heavy metal beat and it took me a few moments to recognize the band. It was Slayer. The DJ had one sick sense of humor.

Cheese face guided me to a room in the back and there was Duncan, looking as laid back and reserved as he ever did.

Duncan had a shock of gray hair and a face like a hawk in flight, which seemed even more so because he typically leaned forward, although now that I think about it that just made him look like a gargoyle. His office was cramped, but what there was of it was decked out with velvet curtains and creepy antique furniture, like there'd been an explosion at Dracula's warehouse.

"Hey there, Vince Dickweed," said Duncan.

"What?"

"That's what Harvey said your name was," and he waved lazily toward cheese face. "But I figured out who he meant."

And your name? Vince, dickweed!

I gave cheese face, nee Harvey, my best glare. He managed to hide the fact that he was no doubt thoroughly intimidated.

Instead he smirked and walked away.

“Welcome,” said Duncan, “to Moveable Feast.”

“Is that what you’re calling it now? Not Garden of Bleedin’ or Bleedin’ Eden anymore?”

“Yeah, that was too on-the-nose. Moveable Feast has more shadings. Plus I’m a Hemingway fan. You like it?”

I actually really did, but I just shrugged.

There were all kinds of rumors about Duncan. It was said he’d died a few times and kept coming back somehow. Some people said that he used to sleep in alleyways, zipped up inside a sleeping bag filled with dirt from his native soil.

Most modern day vampires used as role models various television shows or maybe *Lost Boys* (although no one aped *Twilight*. Sparklepires? Come on. Real vampires considered those books to be such a loose flow of unmitigated crap that they were typically referred to as Vampirrhea.)

Not Duncan. He wanted to be Dracula in the worst way, and most of the time, he was.

He was seated in what he probably thought was an ornate throne, but instead looked like something that was left over from a community theater production of “Camelot.” He was wearing a blue velvet jacket, black pleated pants, and a ruffled white shirt. It was the kind of thing that you wanted to laugh at, except Duncan was a pretty decent guy and offered a huge support system for vamps. Sure, he had his eccentricities, but really, who didn’t?

I glanced toward the curtained off area in the back and saw a gleaming black box. “New coffin?”

“You like? Custom made. Moveable Feast is paying major dividends.”

“Coffins.” I chuckled. “You really are old school.”

He was wary. “Old school. But *not* Old Country. We both know that, don’t we, my friend?”

“Sure we do.”

His face twisted with disgust and I knew a rant was coming on. “Goddamn O.C.’s. You can have a perfectly good thing going, and then the O.C.’s show up with their attitude and their sense of entitlement, and suddenly the villagers are storming

your castle with pitchforks and torches, you know what I'm saying?"

"Absolutely."

"Assholes." He shook his body like a dog tossing off water or maybe fleas and then turned his attention back to me. "So what brings you around, amigo?"

"A girl. Her body turned up with marks. Terry something.."

"You mean Tracy?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's it."

He shook his head and made a clucking sound, like a disappointed chicken. "Too bad about her."

"You knew her?"

He smiled like he was somebody's best uncle, or maybe Santa Claus balancing you on his lap while you told him what would float your boat for Christmas. "I know all the kids. Memory's still razor sharp, my friend. Tracy, she was your typical Wanna V."

I probably need to clarify here. Most people's idea of a vampire nest is bodies littering the place, or maybe terrified human beings trapped in cells, sobbing and screaming for release. And yeah, such places do exist. They're run by the O.C.'s and, like Duncan said, they're the kind of joints that bring the torch and pitchfork brigade down on your head.

But most of the nests of the Nu V movement, which was the popular vampire philosophy since around the 1960s or so, weren't like that. It used to be called the "True Blood" movement until Charlaine Harris cribbed the name for the drink in her books, which led to the TV series, and so to avoid any confusion they started calling themselves Nu Vs. And the Wanna Vs are an intrinsic part of the Nu V movement. (Speaking of Harris, you have no idea how many Wanna Vs have claimed that they were the basis for Sookie Stackhouse. It's gotten to be such a clichéd chat-up line that it's become a joke that all the vamps play along with. "*You're* the basis for *Sookie*? Really? Tell me more!")

Anyway, as the name implies, basically they wanna be vampires, and so they hang out at places like Moveable Feast and make themselves available, hoping that eventually someone will sire them or, to use the Nu V term, "sponsor" them. And the

vampires feed on them. They don't drain them, you understand. That would be not only stupid but also gauche. You don't go to buffet and clean out the entire container of chicken wings. They drink enough to sate their appetites—a little Chinese, a little German, whatever they're in the mood for—and the Wanna Vs get a buzz and feel cool, and they're served orange juice and Fig Newtons and everyone has a good time. Vamps called it "grazing." I think it's a stupid term, but if people feel comfortable comparing themselves to cows then, you know, whatever.

And that's what this girl was, apparently. A Wanna V.

"Except she's dead," I said.

"Yes, I know," said Duncan. "Too bad. Arnold was just totally broken up about it. He thought she was the sweetest thing. He was even thinking of sponsoring her."

I didn't know Arnold, but at the moment I wasn't that interested. "Then what—?"

"It was just her time."

"I still don't—"

"It was one of those things, Vince," said Duncan, spreading his hands in a *What can you do* manner. "Arnold was grazing on her and everything was going fine, and suddenly Tracy cried out and grabbed at her chest and said she couldn't breathe and couldn't see anything, and then she just collapsed. Poor girl had a heart attack or a stroke."

"They're two totally different things, Duncan. Which was it?"

"Do I look like Ben Casey to you?"

"I don't know. Who's Ben Casey?"

"Never mind," he said with obvious annoyance. "All I know was, down she went like a box of rocks. Arnold knew she was a goner and was trying to sponsor her. He made the cut, he dripped blood into her mouth, but it didn't matter. She was already gone. And dead is dead."

That might sound kind of weird coming from a vampire, but I totally knew what he meant. People think we're walking dead guys, and we're not. We exist in a sort of between state. Not dead, not alive. You know on medical shows how you see people die and then they're brought back with electric paddles on crash carts? Being turned or sponsored or whatever you want to call

it...it's just nature's version of a crash cart, except we don't quite come all the way back and we need constant jolts to keep going, but jolts of blood instead of electricity.

And it's just as easy to lose a convert as to create him. There aren't that many vamps who are one hundred percent reliable at turning. You know the axiom "One good turn deserves another?" Comes from vampires, from the old days where turning someone was seen as a good thing, a way of cheating death. So the person who'd been turned then had the responsibility to spread the good word and turn another.

This was back before the French Revolution, which was the first real vampire purge, cloaked as a social uprising. So many of the nobility were vampires that the citizens just decided to kill 'em all to play it safe. That's where the order of the Chevaliers first came from. They defined *sang froid* for generations to come.

"So it was accidental, is what you're saying."

"Completely," said Duncan, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. "Probably a pre-existing condition. Poor girl could have gone at any time. Just our bad luck that it happened on our turf. Where'd the body turn up? Bronx? Queens? Jersey?"

"Ten blocks away."

That was the first time in the conversation that the full weight of the problem dawned on Duncan. He'd been sitting with his feet propped up, but now he slowly lowered them, first the left, then the right, each with a thud. "Ten blocks away?"

"Yeah."

"From *here*?"

"You're starting to see the situation..."

"*Son of a bitch!*" roared Duncan, and he tossed aside the whole sunny uncle bit like it was a tattered blanket. "I'll kill him! I'll—*Raul!*"

You had to love the names of the guys who worked for Duncan.

There was a pattering of feet and a tall, angular dark-skinned vamp burst in. He was sloe of eye and slow of wit. "Yeah?"

"The girl. Terry..."

"Tracy?" I said.

He fired me an annoyed look and said, "Now you've got me

doing it. Yes, Tracy. The girl who died the other day, Raul.”

“The one you told me to get rid of?” said Raul slowly.

“Yeah. Her. What did you do with her?”

“I got rid of her.”

“Where?”

“Where?”

“What am I, talking to myself?” said Duncan with mounting annoyance. “Yes, where? Where did you dump the body?”

He scrunched his face as if trying to mentally reconstruct the entire evening. “Like...in an alley, I think.”

“Nearby here?”

“Not...*right* nearby.”

“*Jesus Christ!*” Duncan practically exploded. “What were you thinking? *Were* you thinking?”

“I dunno. I was heading out, and there was this really cute girl, and she was all, y’know, ‘Hurry back,’ and I didn’t think she’d be here if I didn’t hurry, so...I hurried,” he finished lamely.

“Why didn’t you just bring the cute girl with you on the job?” I asked.

He frowned. “Oh. Yeah, that would’a worked, I guess.”

“So you...what? Tossed her in the trunk of the car, drove ten blocks, dumped her in an alley, and came back?” said Duncan.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Duncan moved pretty fast for an older guy. He came around the desk, grabbed Raul by the front of his shirt and slammed him up against the wall. “*You should have gotten her the hell away from here!*”

“You didn’t tell me to!” Raul’s tone was so whiny that I was tempted to just rip his throat out with my fangs myself.

“I shouldn’t have to! What’s the first rule of vampirism, Raul? What’s the first rule?” And when Raul seemed too petrified to speak in the face of Duncan’s ire, Duncan turned to me and said, “Vince? The first rule?”

“We don’t shit where we eat.”

“*We don’t shit where we eat,*” and he banged Raul against the wall on the two words he was emphasizing for good measure. “Even the O.C.’s know that, and they’re dumb as mud. We don’t leave a lot of bodies behind us, but if we do, we leave them *way*

behind. Even Vince knows that and he's a newborn next to you."

Raul was trembling, and Duncan released him in obvious disgust. Raul cowered there, unsure of what he was supposed to do now, and Duncan said, "Let everyone know we're going to have to start packing up. Tomorrow's moving day. *Dammit*," he added as Raul scurried out. "We *just* got this place the way we wanted it." He looked at me wearily. "Thanks for giving me the heads up on this, kid."

"Look, Duncan, maybe it's not as bad as all that. Maybe you don't have to take off. I mean, I'm the only one who's investigating this right now. I can take a few days, then go back and tell my mom that there's no sign of you guys. That you must have relocated."

He gave me a pitying look. "I'd like to go with that, Vince. I really would. But if the first rule of vampirism is not to shit where you eat, the second is that if your shit's scent gets caught, you're next. I can't take the chance. I owe it my people, and to my own neck, which I've come to care for a lot. Don't worry about us, we'll be fine."

"But where you gonna go?"

He looked amused that I sounded concerned. "Don't worry, kid. There's an abandoned hotel in Astoria I've had my eye on for a while. We can easily—"

That was when three things, none of them good, happened all at the same time.

First came the explosion that erupted from the general area of the front door. Something had blown the thing clear off its hinges. Even from where I was, it shook me to my fangs and caused some of the knickknacks that Duncan had around the place to tumble off their shelves.

Second came a series of small, rapid blasts, as if the entire place had been dropped into the middle of a gigantic popcorn popper. This was followed by a massive illumination of light.

Third came the howls of agony.

Vampires are nocturnal by nature. Despite what you may have heard, we can walk abroad in the sunlight. But we burn pretty easily. We're like redheads with fangs.

And our eyes are light sensitive. *Very* light sensitive. And we

also have extremely keen hearing as well.

Which is why when Body Men enter a nest, oftentimes the first thing they do is throw in flashbangs.

The flashbang, or stun grenade, was first developed in Great Britain in the 1960s and it has become an indispensable tool for Body Men. Basically a flashbang does exactly what the name makes you think it does. It generates a big flash of light accompanied by a very loud noise. The light flash overloads the receptors in the eyes and the noise disorients you, and if you're a human being you stand there or more likely fall down and flop around like a freshly landed carp for about five, maybe ten seconds. Which is all the cops need to slap the cuffs on you.

When you're a vampire, it's like being hit in the crotch with a sack of bricks that's been fired out of a cannon. You're not blinded for ten seconds. Your retinas are good and fried for a minute or two at the least, and your head is ringing for even longer. Not only that, but it makes your eyes go crimson and typically instinct kicks in and your fangs snap out. That makes it easy for Body Men to distinguish vampires from humans in case we're grouped closely together.

It was all happening incredibly quickly as screams were being cut short by squishing sounds, like mallets slamming into watermelons. I knew that particular noise all too well. It was coming from the dance floor that was now flooded with intense floodlights, courtesy of the raiding party, keeping the already blinded vampires off balance. Stakes were being driven into the chests of the denizens of Moveable Feast.

Yes, wooden stakes kill us.

I swear to God, I don't know why. Like I said, beating hearts are just old habits that many of us refuse to drop. Maybe it's because it's so hardwired into us that stakes can take us down that something in us just gives up. Some people claim it deflates us or something, although that doesn't answer why the heart is any better a target than any place else. Really, your guess is as good as mine, but long story short, if a stake gets slammed into a vampire's heart, it's game over.

I heard feet pounding up the stairs toward the office, turned to Duncan and said, "Out the window! Quick!"

"It has bars over it on the outside!"

"Well *that's* just lousy planning! Break 'em!"

"There's no time!" But even as he said it he ran to the window, smashed through the glass. There was no point in being subtle; whoever was coming up the stairs was moving pretty damned fast and was going to be in there in a second, maybe two.

I ran to Duncan's side and together we slammed our fists into the crossbars. The bars remained firm, but fortunately the mounting that held them in the windows gave way. The whole thing flew from the casement and just as Duncan was hauling himself out, a figure appeared at the door. I only had enough time to note that it was a woman and she was armed with a crossbow. If she saw me there helping a vampire escape, I was cooked. The room was too small. Quick as I was, I'd still never be able to avoid the shot. Not of a trained Body Man (women are called Body Men too, in case you were wondering.)

I took the only course open to me. The split second she filled the doorway, I had my stake already in my hand. It had just enough time to register on Duncan, and then I slammed the stake down with all my strength on Duncan's back, right above where the heart was. If the stake is long enough, you can nail a vampire from behind, and mine most certainly was.

Duncan screeched, his voice going higher and higher, almost sounding like a bat. I yanked the stake clear and Duncan tumbled forward, out the window, screaming all the way down before the sound of his body hitting heavily on the ground reached our ears.

I turned and faced the Body Man with as triumphant and non-fangy a smile as I could manage.

"I had it covered," I said.

I had no idea who she was. She wasn't local, that was for sure, nor was she alone, which—as I mentioned earlier—probably indicated that she and her people weren't from around here. It wasn't uncommon for out of town clans to show up on wide-ranging hunts. Garrisons weren't especially territorial. But it was usually considered good form to give the locals a heads up, kind of like registering a flight plan, so that no one crosses anyone up. I had literally gotten no memo about newcomers, and I wasn't thrilled.

She was solidly built, wearing tight black clothes that looked like they'd been spray-painted onto her. Her hair was tied back very tightly and held in place with a long brown needle that I suspected doubled as an emergency stake. Her face was round, her skin was cocoa colored, her lips not too wide, and actually looked capable of smiling every now and then, which wasn't the case for a lot of female Body Men. They can be a pretty damned grim bunch.

As it happened, though, she wasn't smiling at that moment

She had me squarely targeted with the crossbow, and she was holding a gold inlaid wooden crucifix in her left hand. The thing was huge. In the 19th century they could have used it to drive railroad spikes.

I moved right, then left. The crossbow never lost its track of me, and then I saw a small laser target device mounted atop it. I looked down at my chest and sure enough, a little red dot was squarely over my heart. This was just getting better and better.

She still hadn't spoken. "Look, sister," I said, trying to seem more annoyed than anything, even as I felt barely controlled panic welling up within me. "You want to point that thing somewhere else? We're on the same side."

"Are we?" Her voice was light and sounded almost musical, which didn't exactly fit the moment.

"Yeah."

The crossbow sight staying fixed on me, she crossed the room quickly, came right up to me, and brought the crucifix forward. And unlike my mother, who just waved it at me to see if I would recoil while hissing angrily, this girl shoved the thing right up against my face.

I screamed.