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FATE MEETS HER INN

Venice Springs, New York

It's a misty morning in this quaint upstate New York town with a population of around eighteen thousand. A light dew has settled gently onto the bench outside of city hall where a disheveled young woman, with smooth skin—the color of dark honey, lounges lazily with her head buried down into her chest. Unruly dark hair obscures her face completely.

She wears a slightly worn black leather jacket with matching leather pants. Her black t-shirt, with the words “Bite Me” scrawled across the front, completes her biker chick look. It's 6:01 a.m. on a Saturday and no one else is around but this sleeping figure.

The morning silence is interrupted by the sound of light, almost hesitant, footsteps walking down the sidewalk towards city hall. The footsteps come to a complete stop right in front of the woman with the zoned-out expressionless face.

“Excuse me. Miss?”

The voice belongs to an attractive black female wearing sensible shoes. The folded up map in her hand is a dead give away that she's a stranger in town.

“Do you know if there's any motels near here?”

The woman on the bench doesn't move a muscle. It's not apparent that she even hears the stranger speaking to her. After a good minute goes by, the biker chick finally looks up at the visitor as if she doesn't see her, then slowly shifts her gaze over towards some object of interest way off in the distance.

Rochelle Prescott wasn't sure if something was wrong with this woman, but she decides to try again.

“Miss? I'm passing through town and I really need a place to stay for the night. Can you tell me . . .?”

Rochelle gives up when she sees the woman isn't going to acknowledge her presence, let alone speak to her. Curious, she moves in a little closer to look into the woman's glazed eyes. They were pretty eyes, Rochelle thought. Light brown with long lashes.

“Are you okay?”

Instead of getting an answer from the leather chick, Rochelle is startled by the sound of heavy footsteps coming up quickly from behind.

“I can help you, ma’am.”

Rochelle turns around to find a middle-aged man dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans smiling cordially at her. Thank goodness someone in this town was alert and totally with it. Although, it had spooked her a little that he seemed to come out of nowhere.

“Thank you, sir.”

“The nearest place is the Sleepy Trail Inn about one mile up the road from town.” He points toward the trees for emphasis.

“You got a car?”

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll find it okay.”

Rochelle walks away from the two townies quickly. This brief encounter makes her feel uneasy, but she brushes it off as just an isolated incident. When she glances back, the man was still staring at her. She also noticed that the biker chick hadn’t moved from her frozen position. The woman still stared blankly at nothing in particular.

Rochelle mumbles to herself as she heads for her car.

“Must be drugs.”

After Rochelle drives off, Zoey Spangler gets up from the bench and silently walks away towards parts unknown.

Rochelle pulls up to a large, three-story white Victorian mansion that’s obviously well kept. It’s fresh white paint gleams in the early morning sun. The mansion has a wooden porch that winds itself from the front to the right side of the house. She sees several comfy looking lounge chairs sitting on its gray painted floor. It looks friendly enough. There’s a kind of rustic charm to the place that Rochelle likes immediately. The Sleepy Trail Inn seemed like a safe enough place to get away from the road for a while. The safety thing was really important to Rochelle, since she was traveling alone.

A sign on the lawn reads: “Temporary Parking Only” so she knows she’ll probably have to come back out and move her car soon. Funny, though, Rochelle doesn’t see any parking lot. She wonders if they have any rooms available. She sure hoped so. She

was tired of driving and really needed a long bath and a comfortable bed to rest in.

Rochelle feels her stomach growling. "Better get some food before I do anything else."

8:20 a.m.

Rochelle found an old-fashioned diner back in town and had eaten a hearty breakfast of eggs, toast and sausage that was actually quite good. It was the perfect way to kill some time before attempting to get a room. It was very early, after all, and Rochelle was worried that the inn might not be open for business yet.

When Rochelle finally walks inside the inn's antique wooden door, she immediately spots a pleasant looking Asian American woman sitting behind a dark oak desk in the front lobby, which doubled as a check-in area. From what she could tell, the place looked like it had been lovingly restored to its former glory. The wallpaper and curtains were old fashioned, but somehow new.

The owners must really love this old house.

The woman behind the desk looks at her with smiling eyes. Rochelle immediately likes her for some reason. Maybe it was because the woman has a welcoming air about her.

"Good morning. How can I help you?"

Rochelle walks over to the old desk and smiles back.

"Hello. Do you have any rooms available?"

"Single or double?"

"Single."

The woman cheerily pulls out a large, leather bound register book. The most recent page was only half filled.

"Oh, we have plenty of room! How long will you be staying with us, Miss?"

"Rochelle. Rochelle Prescott."

Rochelle had to think a moment. She really hadn't planned to stay for any particular amount of time. One night. Maybe two.

Whatever struck her fancy was all right with her.

"Maybe a couple of days or so. I'm just passing through."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Rochelle."

The woman extends her hand towards Rochelle, who shakes it.

"I'm Karen Nickerson. My husband, Reg, and me run this place. If you need anything during your stay here, just let me know."

"Thank you. I really appreciate that."

Karen hands Rochelle a room key. The old fashioned kind that you actually have to turn in the lock.

"I haven't seen one of these for a while," Rochelle said.

"We like to keep things authentic around here," Karen said.

"Come on. I'll show you to your room. You look like you could use some rest."

"Yeah. That's exactly what I need."

Rochelle follows Karen up the sturdy wooden staircase to the second floor of the old house. Although she didn't plan it, Rochelle was glad that she'd found this beautiful place. Motels were fine, but a bed and breakfast inn was as close to feeling at home as you could get on the road.

A few hours later that same morning, a couple was having car trouble at an outdoors rest area just a little ways down the road from the Sleepy Trail Inn. A man checks under the dead car's hood, while his wife anxiously looks on.

"What's wrong with it?"

The husband didn't bother looking up at his wife. He knew she'd have a worried expression on her face.

"I don't know," he said.

"You know I'm not mechanical. All I know is that it won't start."

He wishes he'd taken that car shop class back in high school instead of tennis. But how was he to know that they'd be stuck out here like this? He's always been able to call Triple A but for some reason he couldn't get his cell phone to work. Figures. This must be the one place in all of New York State where his phone company didn't have roaming. He'd have to look into getting another phone service when they got home.

"Darn. And we were having such a nice time too," his wife said.

"This place is so picture perfect. I can't believe we lucked into finding that little picnic area over there."

Her husband stares at the engine without a clue of what he's looking at.

"Yeah. Although, if we hadn't have stopped we wouldn't be stuck here."

"Oh now, honey. You thought it was a good idea too."

The man shot an annoyed look at his wife, who was leaning lazily up against the passenger door.

"Yeah, at the time. But instead of wasting our time traipsing around some out-of-the-way little town, we should've been sticking to our schedule. Now we're gonna be late."

His wife took exception to this statement. Why, it had been a long time since they'd done anything romantic together. Now he seemed to be blaming her for this mess, just because she wanted a little romance in their lives. Well, she wasn't going to let him get away with his attitude problem.

"Are you saying you don't *enjoy* spending intimate, quality time with me?"

He knew he was in trouble now. How was he going to answer that without getting her mad?

"No. I'm not saying that at all. I'm . . ."

Suddenly a black Ford pickup truck pulls up along the roadside ahead of them. The husband feels an immediate sense of relief.

"Saved by whoever this is."

Two local townie men get out of the truck and walk back towards the couple. Their casual macho air makes them seem like the type of men who would know something about fixing cars.

The one with the beer belly spoke first.

"What seems to be the problem?"

The husband points to his car.

"Our car won't start for some reason."

The beer bellied man peeks under the hood while his younger friend looks over his shoulder.

"Have you checked the carburetor?"

The wife laughs.

"My husband wouldn't know a carburetor from a hole in the wall," she said.

Her husband rolls his eyes.

"Thanks, honey."

The younger man gets behind the wheel of the car and tries to start the engine. The engine makes a coughing noise, and then shuts off.

The sound of the engine gets the woman's hopes up.

"Can you find what's wrong with it?"

Beer belly looks up from under the hood and shakes his head.

"Not here. Don't have the tools. Can I make a suggestion to you folks?"

The husband was open to any suggestions at this point.

"Sure."

"Why don't you let us call you a tow truck? The garage in town can fix it up for you."

The stranded man looks at his watch impatiently.

"Okay. How long will that take?"

The townie scratches his head.

"Shouldn't take too long. Meanwhile, we can give you a lift to the Sleepy Trail Inn, where you can relax while you're waiting."

The husband thought this was a bit strange. Why couldn't they wait at the garage? Then he figured that maybe the repairs could take several hours and the townies were just trying to make it easier on them.

"I guess we don't have a choice, do we?"

"Sure," said the beer-bellied man.

"You can wait here till the tow truck comes an ride into town with him if you like."

The wife pipes in quickly at this suggestion.

"Let's go with these guys, honey. After all, they're nice enough to help us. Besides, I've gotta go to the bathroom."

The husband puts his arm around his wife. They were already late and he didn't want to hear her complain. They might as well go and wait somewhere that was comfortable with clean bathrooms.

"Alright, my man. Lead the way," the husband said.

The couple gets into the back seat of the large black pickup truck. They all head towards the sanctuary of the Sleepy Trail Inn.

On the sidewalk outside of a convenience store located in their picturesque neighborhood, Lonnie Fontaine, a slender, Seneca

Indian, with long hair and a laid back attitude, and his good friend Chang Lee, are sharing small talk when they both notice Lonnie's ex-girlfriend, Nina Pham, crossing the street and heading their way.

"Man, she looks stoned," Chang said.

Nina, whom Lonnie hadn't seen for a while, appears to be in some kind of trance-like state, like a heroin addict who'd just had a fix, although Lonnie knew she'd never done drugs in her life. Although he's concerned about his former girlfriend's well being, he decides to make light of the situation.

"Hey, look who came to see me, Chang. I knew you couldn't stay away forever, darling."

Lonnie purposely stands in Nina's way, preventing her from passing him. He looks deep into her glazed eyes.

"How are you, Nina?"

Nina looks into Lonnie's worried face and vaguely seems to recognize him. The voice in her head was all that she'd been concentrating on. The voice was telling her things that she desperately needed to hear—like how much she was loved and needed.

"Lonnie? You shouldn't be looking at me like that, Lonnie. I'm not your girlfriend anymore."

Lonnie wasn't about to be deterred by this hurtful truth.

"Nina. Why don't you stick around and talk with us awhile. I've missed your sweet face," he said.

Nina stares at Lonnie without a trace of emotion.

"I have to go, Lonnie," Nina said.

The pretty and petite Nina lapses back into her trance and walks slowly down the sidewalk. As Lonnie watches her walk away, he knows it's useless trying to talk to her while she's in that condition. He resented it deeply.

"She's probably going to walk around like that until she can go see that bloodsucking vamp. Look at her, Chang. Walking like a zombie.

I can't believe it's the same girl I used to hang with, man."

Mr. and Mrs. Tisherman, who'd been rescued by those nice townie men in the black pickup truck, sit comfortably in the parlor

of the Sleepy Trail Inn sipping cool glasses of freshly squeezed lemonade and waiting along with another couple, the Johnsons, who in a strange coincidence, have also had the exact same car trouble that morning at almost the exact same time.

Tucked away in one corner of the room, curled up in an old refurbished chair, sits an attractive brown skinned black woman in her mid-thirties wearing silk lounging pajamas and a rueful smile. She keenly watches the two couples as they chat with each other.

"This is a very homey type place. Don't you think, honey?" Mrs. Tisherman said.

"It's comfortable," Mr. Tisherman said.

He glances down at his watch impatiently.

"We've been here two hours already. I wonder how much longer it's gonna take to fix the ignition on our car?"

His wife didn't seem as concerned.

"You're always in such a hurry."

"My brother and his wife are waiting for us."

Mrs. Tisherman saw how worried he looked so she thought of an easy way to solve their time dilemma.

"Maybe we should call your brother and them. So they won't worry."

Mr. Tisherman seemed to think this was a good idea because his face brightened immediately. However, there was one problem. His cell phone still wasn't working.

"Has anyone seen a phone around here?"

Mrs. Johnson spoke up.

"I think there's one in the lobby."

Mr. Johnson leans forward with new interest in these strangers sitting across from them.

"Excuse me. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but are you guys having car trouble too?"

"Yeah. We stalled out at the picnic area near town," Mr. Tisherman said. "Why?"

"Our car stalled too," Mrs. Johnson said.

"Only it was outside the supermarket."

Mrs. Johnson wrinkles her normally smooth brow.

"That's funny. We both had the same car trouble."

Mr. Johnson picked up on this strange coincidence as well.

“And we all ended up at the same place waiting for our cars to be fixed,” Mr. Johnson said.

Mr. Tisherman looks at the Johnson’s as if they had figured out something he hadn’t yet.

“Hmmm. You think there’s something weird going on?” he asked.

Mrs. Tisherman gives a nervous laugh.

“I’m sure it’s just a strange coincidence. Nothing more.”

There was something about this place that made Mrs. Tisherman feel a bit unsettled, although she couldn’t quite put her finger on it, so she didn’t want to hear any talk about strange goings on. She’d always had a kind of sixth sense about things and here again she was getting that familiar funny feeling that something wasn’t right. It gave her the creeps. However, she pushed it to the back of her mind. They’d be leaving here soon and this place would be far behind them. That’s all she cared about.

The woman wearing the silk lounge pajamas added her opinion.

“She’s right, you know. I can assure all of you that everything’s perfectly fine. Your cars are being fixed and you’ll be on your way real soon.”

Both couples look over at the mysterious woman in the corner, who had been quiet up until now. Mrs. Johnson wondered about this woman, but hadn’t summoned up the courage to speak to her for fear of being a pest. Now she had her chance to be nosy.

“Who’re you?”

The woman smiles warmly at Mrs. Johnson.

“I’m the cleaning lady. I’m responsible for keeping this place looking good for nice folks like you.”

This makes Mrs. Tisherman even more curious than Mrs. Johnson. She’d never seen a cleaning lady lounging around in silk pajamas sipping lemonade before. This woman sure didn’t look like your average domestic help.

“You’re the cleaning lady?”

The woman turns her gaze on Mrs. Tisherman. She has a street-wise air about her that doesn’t quite fit in with the quiet rural surroundings.

“That’s right. Now, it’s understandable that you might be getting a little antsy. Perhaps we haven’t been good hosts,” the cleaning lady said.

To the contrary, both couples felt the local folks had treated them very well. Everyone was very kind. However, the pace seemed a lot slower here than they were used to. They were ready to get their cars back from the garage and be on their merry way.

“Tell you what,” the cleaning lady said.

“Why don’t I take you on a little tour of the place. By the time we get back, I’m sure your cars will be ready. Although, I’m no mechanic.”

The couples look at each other.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Mr. Johnson said.

“What do you guys think?”

Mr. Tisherman shrugs.

“Why not? There’s nothing better to do around here.”

The cleaning lady stands up. Her eyes gleam with anticipation.

“Great. Then I’ll meet you all outside in ten minutes.”

The couples were in agreement. They didn’t mind taking a tour of this charming old place. Mrs. Johnson even thought it might be a nice place to come back to for a romantic anniversary, although she didn’t mention this to Mr. Johnson.

The cleaning lady heads out of the room. Mr. Tisherman almost forgets to ask something but remembers just in time.

“Oh! What about my phone call?”

The cleaning lady turns and gives him a wink and a reassuring smile. “The phone will be here when you get back. I promise.”

Mr. Tisherman feels a little embarrassed for asking.

“Yeah. I guess I can wait a few more minutes.”

The cleaning lady nods and strolls leisurely out of the room. Leaving the couples to chat amongst themselves in private.

Rochelle Prescott wakes up from her nap and looks around her clean, but sparse room. There’s a neatly made bed, a dresser with a mirror, and a small wooden desk next to the window. Rochelle opens the small closet and sees there’s just enough room for the few clothes she brought along and her suitcase.

“This is okay,” she says softly to herself. She was pleased it had a desk where she could sit and write in her diary. She had neglected to write anything in it for the past few days. Now she could relax

and write down her most intimate feelings, while she contemplated her next move.

Rochelle looks out the window and sees a view of the large backyard that seems to go on forever into the trees some distance away. She can also see a well-kept garden with a stone path winding through it in another section of the property. She couldn't wait to go for a walk and look at all the pretty flowers.

Rochelle was still tired, but she decides to write down something real quick in her diary. She had a sudden urge to record this moment. She unzips her satchel and pulls out her journal with its pretty flowered cover. It was a comfort to hold it again. The book, with its blend of earthy colors, was like a friend she carried around with her wherever she went.

Rochelle sits down at the desk and stares out the window for a moment. She sought inspiration amongst the pretty picture of sunshine, clouds, and trees outside. Soon she was scribbling down her thoughts:

Just arrived at a place called the Sleepy Trail Inn. It's a very beautiful spot in this part of New York. There's a small town nearby, Venice Springs I think? And the people seem friendly. I know I've just gotten here, but I feel very comfortable already. It's a quaint little place, and I hope being here will help ease my mind for a few days.

Rochelle puts her pen down and reaches into her pants pocket and takes out a small gold cross necklace. She puts it around her neck, and then lovingly fondles the pendant. There's a solitary diamond in the middle that gleams from the sunlight streaming in through the window. Rochelle stares into the endless sky and lets her mind drift aimlessly with the floating clouds.

Inside the wooden tool shed, that sits somewhere on the lush acres behind the Sleepy Trail Inn, Reg Nickerson is being tormented. His body wrenches around uncontrollably and he continuously knocks his head against one of the shed's walls in a

vain attempt to rid himself of whatever painful thing is residing inside his brain.

“No. No! Please stop. I . . . I can’t take it! I’m sorry.”

Reg holds both hands over his ears as he bangs against the wall again. The pain was almost unbearable. It burned like fire through his whole body. It was a hot white heat that no words could possibly express. The voice in his head was particularly loud—and angry.

“I’m sorry. I promise not to do it again,” Reg cries.

“Please . . . stop!”

Reg screams out in agony. Suddenly the pain disappears as quickly as it had come and his head begins to clear. Grateful to be relieved from his torment, he whispers to someone or something his eyes cannot see with a mixture of respect, fear, and humility.

“Thank you, master.”

Unable to take another nap, Rochelle has made her way down into the inn’s parlor room. Rochelle studies the old paintings on the parlor wall. Not being an art enthusiast, she has no idea if they’re real or not. All she knows is that the depictions of various outdoor scenes are pretty to look at, and strangely calming.

A female voice from behind chimes in.

“Aren’t those paintings adorable?”

Rochelle turns around and sees an attractive Latina woman about her same age, wearing a big smile and the kind of clothes that Rochelle would describe as “urban hip.” Black jeans and boots with an animal print blouse. The woman had a mass of brown curly hair that framed her face and neck.

“So Americana, don’t you think?”

“Huh?”

The perky woman stands next to Rochelle and stares at the same painting Rochelle had been admiring.

“They look like Poole’s.”

Rochelle looks at the woman blankly.

“You know, the great American landscape painter, Charles Poole. They look like originals, but they couldn’t be. Those things are worth thousands.”

Rochelle looks at the painting again. It was nice, but she couldn't imagine it being worth more than a few hundred dollars.

"Sorry. I just don't know much about art. I was just looking."

The woman smiles cheerily.

"Oh, don't mind me. Little details are just carrying me away again. I love the little details that make up a room. It turns me on. Maybe because I'm an interior designer."

Rochelle looks at this obviously urbane woman with new interest.

"You are? Wow."

The woman extends a friendly hand towards Rochelle.

"I'm January Quinones, interior designer extraordinaire! At least in my own mind."

This makes Rochelle laugh. She instantly liked this stranger.

"Rochelle Prescott. Nice to meet you. I've never met an interior designer before. What kind of rooms do you design?"

January was happy that someone was interested in her work. Not that she liked to brag, but when the opportunity arose for her to show off her stuff, she always obliged.

"All kinds. I've got various richy-poo clients that I do things for."

"Sounds exciting."

January shrugs as if it was no big deal.

"Sometimes."

January turns around slowly and soaks up the parlor's atmosphere as if she were experiencing something truly special.

"This place I really love. It has such an eighteen-nineties feel."

Rochelle looks around, but only sees a nice room with some old furnishings. However, she didn't want to come across like a country bumpkin who just got off the farm.

"It *is* kind of old fashioned. Elegant, yet lived in."

Rochelle hoped she sounded sophisticated.

"Hey, you sound like you'd make a pretty good interior designer yourself. What do you do anyway, Rochelle?"

Rochelle knew she couldn't pretend to be something she wasn't, so she told the truth. "Me? I'm an accounts payable office assistant on leave from my job."

In fact, Rochelle hated her job. It was so bland and boring. She was good at it, but it was time to find something a little more

challenging. January didn't seem to mind, however, that she didn't have a fancy professional position.

"I bet you're good at that. Everyone's got something special they do." January said.

Rochelle didn't see anything special about it.

"I've just got a job, while you've got this glam career. Tell me this, would you trade places with me?"

January ran her fingers through her thick, bouncy hair.

"Of course not. I love what I do."

Rochelle looks at the painting a third time. She'd have to find the local library and look up this Poole character. Just to satisfy her curiosity.

"I'm hoping to find something I love doing too. I guess that's part of the reason I'm here."

January looks at Rochelle quizzically.

"To get a job at the inn?"

Rochelle shakes her head.

"No. It's a long story."

Rochelle looks into January's eyes and sees someone she wants to get to know better. Friends had been hard to come by on this road trip. Maybe she and January Quinones could make a special connection that would lead to a long-term friendship.

"Wanna go to your room and talk some more?"

Rochelle suggested January's room because she wanted to see what kind of things an interior designer brought with her when she traveled. To her delight, the peppy Latina agreed.

"Great. I love having company. Hope you don't mind all the crap I have thrown around."

Rochelle smiles at January.

"Nah. I won't mind."

The cleaning lady is taking her small tour group on a stroll of the grounds when they come upon a painted white tool shed. She's about to explain to them the use of the shed in the caretaking of the property, when suddenly Reg Nickerson staggers out of its wooden door looking a bit shaken.

He's as surprised to see the group of people staring at him, as they are to see him.

"Reg. what're you doing out here when there's so much for you to do inside the house?"

The cleaning lady was hoping to find a way to distract the others away from the disheveled black man's awkward appearance. Reg responds to the cleaning lady in a flat voice.

"Had to put some tools away. I'm heading up to the house now."

The group watches Reg walk slowly in the direction of the inn. The cleaning lady watches him for only a few moments, however, then turns her attention back to her guests. She gestures grandly towards the shed and says humorously: "*This* is a tool shed."

The couples laugh at the obvious.

The cleaning lady didn't know that, right this very second, she and her little group are being watched from a distance by a man with a neatly trimmed salt and pepper beard and a keen eye, who hides behind a large tree. He stares at them with hawk-like intensity, mentally recording every detail.

On the west end of town, Pilar Hutchinson walks up to a three story blue and white building with a wooden facade. She double-checks the instructions written down on a small piece of paper just to make sure she's at the right place.

"Plain Ole Bar and Grill. Yep. This is the place he said he'd be."

Pilar pushes in the ornate wooden door and walks inside.

There are a few people scattered around the bar for an afternoon drink. They barely seem to notice the pretty Puerto Rican woman with her designer jeans and tan suede jacket. The bartender, however, notices her right away. It was his job, after all, to be aware of any strangers coming or going. You never knew who was going to come in unexpectedly or what kind of trouble they might bring with them.

Pilar put on a friendly smile as she approaches the bar. The bartender looks at her suspiciously as he wipes a beer mug clean.

"Nice place."

"It's a living. Can I help you, miss?"

Pilar hops up on one of the worn leather bar stools and slaps both hands on the counter, right where the bartender could see them. This was so she would appear less threatening. It was one of those “non-verbal cues” her husband had taught her.

“I hope so. I’m looking for a guy named, Hutch. He’s supposed to be staying at your fine establishment.”

The bartender squints his eyes. Pilar felt he was trying to sense something about her. It was something that the average person wouldn’t notice unless you knew what to look for. She knew he was sizing her up in that way—and she knew why he was doing it. But Pilar was careful not to reveal any more than she intended someone to know.

“That name doesn’t exactly sound familiar,” he replies.

Pilar whips out her drivers license and shows it to the bartender.

“I’m Pilar Hutchinson. His wife.”

The bartender relaxes and suddenly becomes very friendly.

“Why didn’t you say so before? He’s staying in one of the rooms upstairs. You’re welcome to go up if you want.”

Pilar smiles and puts her I.D. back in her jacket pocket.

“I will, thanks. After you fix me a drink.”

“What’ll it be?”

“Your best imported lager.”

“Coming right up.”

The bartender winks at her before going off to select one of his specialty German imports. This lady was something special. His female regulars never ordered lager. He didn’t know how that guy Hutch had gotten so lucky. Maybe he could pry it out of him in exchange for a free drink.

Just outside of town, there’s a popular hiding spot that the local young people called the jumping grounds. It was nothing more than a clearing in the woods with a few old logs and rocks, but it was effectively hidden from view unless you knew where to find it. Making this the perfect spot for all kinds of youthful activities where no adults were allowed.

Lonnie happened to be driving by the jumping grounds area when he noticed a familiar car parked along the side of the road. It

belonged to his friend, Zoey Spangler. He figured she must be out here doing something. What, he didn't know, but he was going to find out. He'd been worried about her lately and wanted to see if his suspicions about her behavior could be confirmed.

Lonnie pulled over and headed towards the clearing. He could hear loud rock music coming from behind the trees. Maybe she was there with some friends and they were having a party. That means he'd be interrupting something that maybe he had no business sticking his nose in but—oh well. Zoey was an old friend of his, so he figured he had a right to check up on her.

When he reached the clearing, Lonnie saw Zoey all right. She was all alone too. Zoey was dancing around wildly to the music coming out of her boom box. Her dark brown, naturally curly hair shook all over her face as she jumped around and flailed her arms up and down to the fast heavy metal beat.

This wasn't that unusual in itself. He had been to plenty of rock concerts with Zoey and their friends over the years and they all loved to dance and sing along with their favorite tunes. However, there was something disturbing about how she was throwing herself around in front of him.

It was almost violent. Her eyes rolled around in her head and she seemed completely oblivious to her surroundings—including him. It appeared that nothing mattered to Zoey at that moment except this wild dance. She seemed completely consumed by it. It was eerie, yet fascinating.

Lonnie walks up closer to Zoey and waits for her to notice him, but she didn't even look his way. The music blares on and on. He recognized the group, but it wasn't exactly his taste. Some kind of thrash metal band. Lonnie didn't know Zoey was into their type of music.

There were a lot of things he didn't know about Zoey these days. He used to know her pretty well since they'd grown up together, but in recent years they had drifted apart. Seeing each other only occasionally at parties or bumping into one another on the street. He'd heard she was struggling with a drug problem.

If Zoey was on some type of drug binge, he'd have to figure out a way to get her back to town safely without either of them getting hurt.

“Zoey? Are you celebrating something?”

Zoey slowly becomes aware that someone's speaking to her.

"Whaa—"

Lonnie moves in a little closer. He wanted to make sure she could hear him over the music.

"Are you celebrating?"

Zoey gives her old friend a cockeyed smile.

"Yeah, dude. I'm celebrating the full moon."

Lonnie looks up at the afternoon sky. He knew that sometimes you could see the moon faintly during the daytime, but there was no sign of it now.

"There's no moon out yet."

In fact, it was turning out to be a partly cloudy day. No one was going to see much sun today if it stayed like this.

"There will be, and it'll be beautiful!"

Zoey twirls around ecstatically. She reminded Lonnie of those old news highlights from the 60's that showed free spirited hippies prancing around talking about free love.

Zoey's clothes were covered with dirt and grass stains, like she'd been rolling around on the ground.

"Your clothes are getting all dirty," Lonnie pointed out.

Zoey looks down at her clothes then gives her shoulders a big shrug. "These? Leather's easy to clean. You know, Lonnie, I was on my way to the store when I just got a sudden urge to dance to the moon!"

Zoey twirls around and around with childlike abandon.

"Yeah. To the moon, baby!"

At that exact moment, in another part of the woods, the Tishermans have decided to do a little exploring of their own. Having grown bored with the tour of the inn's grounds, the two couples had all decided to go off on a short nature walk—without that strange cleaning lady.

The cleaning lady warned them about venturing off too far and getting lost, but they had shrugged off her concerns. After all, it was broad daylight. Surely the woods couldn't be that dense this close to the house. They were confident they could easily find their way out.

The Johnson's had separated from the Tishermans a ways back, deciding to stop and relax closer to where they had started. They were too cautious anyway for the couple's liking. The Tishermans often went on hikes together back home for exercise and weren't the least bit intimidated about exploring the area further. In fact, they had been walking around for almost two hours now. Time seemed to disappear out here amongst the trees and sounds of nature.

Mr. Tisherman's attention was currently focused on an old tree he had practically stumbled into while not looking where he was going. He immediately noticed something strange on its bark that had him captivated. Mrs. Tisherman was a short distance away looking at various plant species.

Mr. Tisherman decides to show his wife what he found.

"Honey. Look at this one over here!"

Mrs. Tisherman immediately came over to see what he was staring at.

"Ooo yeah. This one's even stranger than the other one we saw."

This was the second set of strange markings they'd seen so far.

Mrs. Tisherman stares at the markings in wonder.

"I wish I'd brought the camera with me. This could be an important discovery." Visions of worldwide media attention briefly danced through her head. Her husband was less naïve.

"Don't you think the owners of the inn would know about this? Maybe it's not that important."

Mrs. Tisherman puts her hands on her hips and inches her nose up closer to the tree trunk for a better look. She fancied herself to be an amateur anthropologist. She was sure they had found something different from anything that's ever been seen before. The markings appeared to be some kind of symbols scratched into the tree. They looked like primitive writing, similar to what the Egyptians used to do.

"Maybe they do, maybe they don't. Obviously, they're not giving these markings any kind of respect," Mrs. Tisherman said.

"This could be a very important cultural thing."

"Maybe you're right," Mr. Tisherman said.

Mr. Tisherman realized his wife might be on to something. Hey, if the owners of the property couldn't figure out they had something big right under their noses that were their problem. He decided

they'd stop back by here on the way home and take some pictures of these strange markings, in secret, of course.

"Maybe these were made by some ancient tribe thousands of years ago," he said.

His wife wrinkles her nose.

"Naw. It doesn't look that old. But I do think we should come back here later and take some pictures. Maybe one of the museums would be interested in them."

"You really think they could be that valuable, huh?"

From a distance they hear the voice of Mrs. Johnson calling out to them. "Hellooo! Where're you guys?"

Mrs. Tisherman shouts back through the woods.

"We're over here!"

The couples can't see each other but they can hear pretty well. Mr. Johnson's voice booms out.

"Come on! We're going back to the inn to check on our cars!"

The Tishermans weren't done with their explorations yet. They wanted to see if they could find more of the strange markings.

"That's okay. You go on ahead. We'll be there soon!" Mrs. Tisherman assured them.

"Okay! See you there!" Mr. Johnson said.

Mr. Tisherman squats down on the ground after spotting what looks like a fresh mound of dirt. He sifts some of the brown earth through his fingers. A curious Mrs. Tisherman walks over to see what he's found.

"What're you doing?"

"I found this fresh mound of dirt. I wonder what's buried beneath here?"

Mrs. Tisherman didn't have the slightest idea, but she didn't think it was important.

"It's probably some animal's food. We better leave it alone."

This explanation didn't satisfy Mr. Tisherman. It didn't feel right to him.

"What animal in these woods would bury their food like that? None that I know of."

"Deer's might."

Mr. Tisherman looked doubtful.

"I don't think so."

Back at the check in desk, Reg Nickerson rubs his still aching head. The intense pain was gone, but the experience had left him with a headache. He had been punished harshly for his disobedience. He'd neglected to bury a body last night as instructed. The master must have taken care of it himself. For this, he paid a heavy price. His wife, Karen, looks at him with concern in her eyes.

"Reg, honey, are you all right? Did you hit your head on something?"

"I'm alright, babe. I've just got a headache, that's all."

Reg didn't want Karen to know the truth. He knew she'd just worry needlessly. Everything was all right now for the time being.

"Are you sure?"

Karen sensed it was something more than a headache, but if he didn't want to tell her she couldn't force him.

"Um hmm," Reg replied. "It's nothing. Really."

"Well, there's some aspirin in the kitchen if you want."

Reg manages a weak smile at his wife. "Thanks."

Karen decides to change the subject. They had work to do around the house.

"We better start preparing for dinner. Who're the selected guests? There's hardly anyone around here."

Reg remembered the couples he'd seen out by the shed earlier.

"There will be. I'll go to the kitchen and fix that burner for the cook."

Reg headed towards the kitchen.

"Okay, honey. And take care of that headache while you're at it."

Reg winks at his wife and gives her the thumbs up sign.

A ruggedly handsome middle-aged black man with a neatly trimmed salt and pepper beard spots the pretty lady sitting at the bar. She was a sight for sore eyes, that's for sure. It'd been several weeks since he'd laid eyes on a woman who could put the fire in his soul like she did.

Not one to shy away from a challenge, or good conversation, he approaches her casually and decides to go in for the kill.

“Hey pretty lady. Can I buy you a drink?”

Pilar turns around and looks at this man who had the guts to be so bold with his cheesy come on line. She quickly checks him out all over and sees that he has a firm jaw and strong hands. But it was his eyes that captured her attention the most. They were twinkling with a sensitivity that she found very attractive.

“My husband told me never to drink with strangers,” she said.

The man noticed Pilar’s wedding ring and let out a slight chuckle.

“Your husband is a wise man. I’d like to meet him sometime.”

His voice was deep and rich. It made Pilar shiver with anticipation. She liked strong men.

“You can . . . as soon as he gives me a kiss.”

Without skipping a beat, the man leans over and gently kisses Pilar on the lips.

“How’s that?” he said.

This rugged specimen of a man impressed Pilar. His lips felt firm and smooth. She decided to flirt a little bit more with him. A little teasing never hurt anyone.

“That was good. But my husband can do better.”

Feeling challenged, the man kisses Pilar again. This time he put more passion into it. He’d win her over—one way or another. Pilar smacks her lips and smiles.

“Mmmm. Now that’s more like it. Mr. Hutchinson.”

Hutch shared her amusement at their little game.

“Glad you found it pleasing, Mrs. Hutchinson.”

Pilar grab’s her husband’s hand and looks deeply into his eyes.

“I missed you,” she said.

“I missed you too,” Hutch said.

He was glad she had made it there safely. He hadn’t heard her voice since late last night when they had talked on the phone.

“So, what’d you find out?” Pilar asked.

“We’re definitely in the right place.”

Hutch looks around the bar to see if anyone was watching them. No one was, but he felt the need to be cautious here. He also had some other desires that needed attention. The kind of attention only his wife could provide.

“Why don’t we go upstairs where we can talk more intimately?”

Pilar smiles broadly.

“I’m with you, baby.”

Hutch turns his attention to the bartender.

“Put it on my tab, Bob.”

The bartender nods back, indicating that he’ll do just that.

Lonnie wonders to himself why Zoey hasn’t gotten tired yet. Her energy for this “moon dance” seems boundless. This made him even more suspicious. Maybe the recent rumors he’d heard about Zoey were true. Zoey motions for Lonnie to join her.

“Lonnie. Come on and dance with me!”

Lonnie shakes his head.

“Oh no. I’m not interested in your dance rituals.”

He was baiting her on purpose to see how she’d respond.

“It’s not a ritual, Lonnie. It’s just me being me.”

Lonnie was skeptical about that.

“Sure, Zoey. The old you would never do a dance just because the moon is full.”

In fact, she would’ve laughed at something so un-cool. There was something very wrong about this whole dancing thing, but he didn’t want to be too quick to judge what it was.

“This *is* the same old me. I’m just happy, that’s all. Know why?”

“Why.”

“Because, I don’t give a damn anymore about what people think.”

“I wasn’t aware that you ever did, Zoey.”

Zoey stops dancing for a moment and looks at Lonnie.

“I *do* have a heart, you know. I just don’t show it all the time.”

Lonnie meant that Zoey had always done what she felt like regardless of the consequences—or how much she hurt the people who loved her. Everyone said that one day her careless ways would get her into trouble.

Zoey stretches her hands towards Lonnie.

“Come on, Lonnie. Join me in a dance of happiness.”

This was really getting corny. Lonnie was convinced Zoey was under some kind of influence, either chemical or supernatural. She

never used to talk like this. It reminded him of how much Nina had changed recently. People he knew and loved were turning into complete strangers right before his eyes. He suddenly felt depressed.

“Sorry. I’m not feeling very happy these days,” Lonnie said.

“We used to dance together all the time.”

“That was when we were kids.”

Zoey felt Lonnie was being a party poop. She felt so much joy inside of her spirit and wanted him to feel it too. She didn’t know why he resisted everything so much. Why not just give in to it? Something special had come to Venice Springs and changed it into a magical, mystical place. Why resist the inevitable? They’d all become vampires someday, and wouldn’t that be something to see?

“So?” she shot back. “For five minutes let me help you forget about your problems, Lonnie. Come on, it’s fun.”

Zoey dances around Lonnie in a circle.

“Let’s lose ourselves in the music!”

Nina Pham lies in bed tossing and turning. She is completely consumed by some terrible nightmare she can’t seem to wake up from. Sweat pours from her forehead and she keeps clutching at her covers. Occasionally, she fights off some invisible entity by swatting the air with her arms.

“No. No. Get away!”

Her grandmother and guardian, Nana Pham, sits in a rocking chair close by. She keeps a watchful eye on her granddaughter in case she should suddenly wake up and need her assistance.

Nina’s younger brother, Eric, stands watching from the doorway. It hurts him to the core to see his only sister in such a distressed state. He feels completely helpless to do anything to stop her suffering. Eric just wanted the whole thing to go away.

“Can’t we stop it, Nana Pham?”

Nana Pham shakes her head impassively. She knows that he already knew the answer to his question.

“No. There’s nothing we can do for her now. All we can do is make her comfortable.”

She also prayed that the good part of Nina’s soul would be strong enough to fight off the impending evil that was determined to

take her over and send her into the world of the undead, where there was no escape back to the world of the living.

“Goodness, January. I can’t believe you’ve done all these places.”

Rochelle peers at the many photographs of home interiors that January Quinones had carefully arranged in her portfolio. January certainly had a flair for turning once drab walls and furnishings into something quite fabulous.

“Isn’t it wild? Some of my assignments have been a lot of fun,” January said. “For instance, see this bedroom?”

She points to a photo of a bedroom decked out in jungle prints, hanging plants, and a funky mural painted on the wall depicting wild animals.

Rochelle stares in wonder at this depiction of overindulgence.

“That’s a bedroom? It looks more like a safari.”

January shrugs nonchalantly.

“This client was really into the jungle look. Anyway, before I got started he required me to go to the zoo everyday for a month. His treat!”

January’s eyes danced as she recalled the memory.

“Sounds like fun.”

“It was.”

She points to another one of her favorites.

“Or this one. This was a female client who wanted her whole house done in modern French.”

Rochelle had no idea what modern French was, but she assumed by the photograph that January had gotten the look down pat.

“She sent me to Paris for a week to . . . soak up zee French culture.”

January leans back on the bed and runs her fingers through her long curly locks. She exuded an air of hip sophistication that Rochelle could never hope to emulate.

“And let me tell you, I soaked it up all right. I went to every show and nightclub I could squeeze in.”

“And did she like your finished work?”

January smiles confidently.

“Oh yeah. It was easy. It all comes easy to me. As my mother says, I’ve got a knack for putting people and atmospheres together.”

Rochelle was ready to put her new friend’s skills to the test. Sure, January was great with rich people who had exotic tastes, but what about ordinary folks like her?

“Okay. If I were one of your clients, what would you design for me?”

January studies the pretty woman with the smooth chocolate brown skin and dreamy eyes, sitting next to her, who appears impeccably clean and neat. Rochelle seemed to glow with an inner calmness and sense of order that reminded January of women in her own family she’d known growing up. She wondered where Rochelle drew her sense of peace and dignity. She must have had a good upbringing, January reasoned. Rochelle definitely seemed in touch with her inner Zen.

“Something old-fashioned,” January finally answered.

“Lots of texture and frills. With earth tone furniture.”

January had said it with such confidence that Rochelle believed this young, talented designer had pinpointed something that, in her own heart, she knew she’d be perfectly happy living with. While she didn’t exactly think of herself as “old-fashioned” she imagined January was thinking of something that was feminine and warm.

“Sounds nice. Even though I know I could never afford it.”

January poo-pooed that kind of defeatist sentiment.

“Not a problem,” she said. “I’d do yours for free.”

Rochelle’s eyes widened in surprise. Why would this talented woman want to spend time decorating her place for free? January gives Rochelle a friendly smile, as if she’d read her mind.

“I like you, Rochelle. You’re good people.”

They both turn towards the door when they hear a light knocking. Karen Nickerson stands in the doorway looking apologetic.

“Sorry to interrupt you ladies, but it’s time for you to come and be seated for dinner.”

Rochelle looks at her watch. Where had the time gone? It was five forty-five p.m.

January jumps up immediately.

“Food? I’m there like yesterday. I don’t know about you, Rochelle, but I’m starving.”

Rochelle could relate to that. Her stomach had begun to rumble a little too. "I'm right behind you, girlfriend."

The dining room seemed almost too grand for a place that billed itself as a "warm and cozy stop for weary travelers."

Walls painted a rich mauve color, with ornate gold stenciling circling the entire upper area, surrounded the pitch-black ceiling.

A lavish crystal chandelier, worth thousands of dollars, hung in the center of the room giving off a soft warm glow. Heavy gold curtains covered the windows. Rochelle noticed that they were drawn shut so that no natural light entered the room.

A huge cherrywood dining table took up space on the right side of the room. Its seating capacity could accommodate up to twenty people at once. The table's highly polished wood surface was covered with a hand made white crocheted tablecloth. The centerpiece was a beautiful polished gold candelabra that looked like a family heirloom.

January takes a seat next to Rochelle and coos over the room's interior. "Boy, they must really hit up the antique shops to furnish this place.

Rochelle looks down at her place setting. Everything was beautiful and old. The heavy white ceramic plates with the delicate flower border had a large "C" engraved in the middle.

The silverware was heavy as well, and gold plated. None of that cheap bendable stuff you get at other establishments. Rochelle was starting to feel pampered. She looked over at January and could tell she was impressed too. Actually, January was taking mental notes so that she could ask the owners where she could find some of these gorgeous things.

Rochelle and January weren't alone for this meal. They were joined by a few couples and scattered individuals who must also be staying at the inn. Rochelle hadn't seen these people before. The house was so big that many people could stay in their rooms and you'd never know they were there. A complimentary meal had a way of bringing people out of the woodworks.

Karen was standing around making sure all of the guests were seated. "That's right everyone. Make yourselves comfortable," she

said. “Hope you’re all hungry. The cook made enough for everyone to have seconds.”

January thought that was extremely generous. Not only did they get free dinner, but also they could have more if they wanted. She wasn’t used to this kind of down home hospitality. In New York City, they charge you an arm and a leg for two tiny morsels. She was prepared to do some serious chowing down.

Karen kept glancing at the doorway nervously. All the while she wore a big bright smile on her face. She didn’t want to give the impression that anything was amiss. Their dining experience must be made to feel as natural as possible. It was her job to make sure that impression came off perfectly.

So far so good.

Suddenly, the hair on the back of Karen’s neck stood up. It was time. Time to see who were the real guests and who were the selected ones. Sometimes it was several of them. Sometimes it was only one or two—but someone was always selected.

“Ah, hi everyone. As soon as the mistress of the house arrives we can . . .”

As if on cue, Delijah Champion makes her grand entrance into the dining room. All eyes turn to look at this tall, diva-like woman, wearing designer shades.

“We can, begin the big pig out,” Delijah said.

Everyone laughs. They watch Delijah stride across the room with the aura of a queen. She wears blue jeans, a white shirt, high-heeled black boots and an ornately decorated brocade jacket. Her hair flows down her back in dark, thick waves and her perfectly manicured nails are painted a deep shade of red.

“Hello everybody. I’m Delijah Champion, mistress and co-owner of this sweet little inn. Hope your stay here has been good so far.”

Delijah gestures with her hands as she talks. Her voice was rich and melodious. She had no problem speaking with self-confidence and conviction. This was a woman who had *presence*. When she entered a room you definitely noticed her. As for Delijah, she enjoyed soaking up the spotlight. In another life she could’ve been an actress. She certainly had the flare for it.

“Here at the Sleepy Trail we aim to please, and please some more,” Delijah said.

One of the male guests speaks up.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Champion.”

The man stares at her lustily as she sits down in her seat at the head of the table. Delijah captivated people and she knew it.

“Oh, call me Delijah. I can't stand too much formality. Except from my servants.”

Delijah glances over at Karen who was busily placing small portions of food on her mistress' plate. Delijah spreads her long brown arms outward in a grand gesture of sharing.

“Help yourself everyone. There's plenty of food here.”

January is one of the first to dig into the plates of eggs, home fries, quiche, pancakes and other assorted goodies. She greedily watches a big slab of butter melt down the sides of her fluffy pancakes, and then follows up with a healthy helping of pure maple syrup.

“It's breakfast for dinner. I'm diggin it,” January said.

Delijah politely watches her guests fill their plates with food, then takes even more delight in watching them enjoy the delectable home cooked meal. The cook here was one of the best in the area and he was definitely worth his weight in gold. The free meals were one of the inn's main attractions. It also kept the guests, fat and happy.

The Johnson's are at the opposite end of the table filling their plates as well. Mr. Johnson leans over and whispers into his wife's ear.

“I wonder where that other couple is? If they don't hurry, they're gonna miss out.”

“Are we missing someone?” Delijah inquires.

Mr. Johnson wonders how she could have heard what he said from way across the table.

“Yeah. The Tishermans. They're stranded like us,” Mr. Johnson said. “Last we saw they were back there in the woods looking around.”

Delijah looks at him reassuringly.

“Well, I wouldn't worry too much. Some people get extremely fascinated by our little nature area out there.”

The cleaning lady joins them at the table. She had changed back into her silk lounging pajamas.

“I’m sure they’ll be here soon. I specifically told them not to stay out there too long.”

The Johnsons nod their heads in agreement. She had indeed told them not to wander too far off the property. What could the Tishermans be doing out there all this time? What were they, some kind of nature nuts?

The cleaning lady serves herself up a big slice of spinach quiche. She made no attempt to introduce herself and neither did Delijah. Everyone figured she must be Delijah’s assistant.

Delijah sticks her fork into a piece of potato but doesn’t eat it. In fact, she still hadn’t eaten a bite of food. She makes a good show of using her utensils and distracting the guests with conversation.

“Anyway. They’re not the only ones missing,” she said.

Mrs. Johnson looks up from his plate.

“They’re not?”

She wondered who else on earth could be missing. Delijah looks directly at Mrs. Johnson and gives her an extremely charming smile.

“In case some of you were looking forward to meeting my brother, Darius, he sends his deepest apologies that he won’t be joining us for dinner. Alas, he’s not feeling up to it.”

Rochelle wondered who Darius was in relation to the inn. This is the first time she’d heard his name mentioned. So what? He was her brother. Why should they care about meeting him? Rochelle was there for a few days of rest and relaxation. She didn’t care if she ever saw this Darius person.

An amused chuckle escapes Delijah’s lips, as she reads the woman’s mind. She then looks straight into Rochelle’s eyes, which startles poor Rochelle for a second. Delijah’s gaze is deep and piercing. She almost seems to be looking right through Rochelle, and right into her very soul. The moment passes quickly, though, and Rochelle feels a bit foolish for being intimidated, just because this charismatic woman was looking at her.

“But at least I’m here, right?”

Lonnie allows himself to be picked up and carried away by the thumping of the base guitar. He goes into his much practiced rock star pose and sings along with the lead.

“Yeah, baby. You got me burning. Burning in love . . . with you,” Lonnie sings. He’d gotten Zoey to switch CD’s to one of his favorite albums.

He’d forgotten how much fun this was. Playing air guitar and strutting around like he owned an imaginary stage.

“Whoa . . . oooo, baby!”

He pleaded through an imaginary microphone. Lonnie jerks his body around, his long black hair flopping loosely around his head.

Zoey, who had been dancing and laughing right along with Lonnie, suddenly stops dead in her tracks and stands there completely silent. Her eyes glaze over as she began to hear that voice inside her head again—beckoning to her.

“Yes. I’m coming.”

Zoey shuts the boom box off and the area grows suddenly quiet. The only sound they hear now is that of a few birds chirping in some distant treetop. Zoey picks her black leather jacket up from off the ground and heads for her car.

Lonnie has been completely caught off guard.

“What’s up, Zoey? You leaving already?”

Zoey doesn’t bother to answer him. She just keeps on walking briskly towards her car. Lonnie runs to catch up.

“Hey, Zoey. I ‘m not done with my performance.”

Zoey had begged him to dance with her for just a measly five minutes. He had given in and agreed. Now she was hastily leaving for some reason and he wanted to know why.

“I was just, you know, getting my groove on.”

Lonnie waves his hand in front of Zoey’s blank face. She doesn’t respond.

“Earth to Zoey.”

Zoey reaches her car and throws her things in the back seat. She jumps into the driver’s side then starts the car as Lonnie runs over and peers inside the open window. Her strange behavior was beginning to piss him off.

“Hey! Where’re you going? Answer me, Zoey.”

Lonnie hears the car’s engine start up. Zoey keeps her gaze straight ahead. Lonnie’s not sure she even hears him at this point.

“Don’t just leave like this. Zoey!”

Zoey hits the gas and the car jerks away from Lonnie and swerves into the road. She heads off towards the direction of the

Sleepy Trail Inn. For a moment, a frustrated Lonnie contemplates driving off after her, but then he thinks better of it. If Zoey was going where he thought she was, he didn't want to go there alone—or unarmed.

The sinking sun barely had time to peek through the trees before clouds again obscured it.

6:42 p.m.

The Tishermans continue their amateur investigations. They're convinced that they've discovered something unique and priceless in these woods. The get together with Mr. Tisherman's brother and his wife was long forgotten. His brother would understand that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, after they explained all about these potentially valuable markings.

Mrs. Tisherman spots something white on the ground. She bends down to take a closer look.

"What's this?"

Her husband comes over and looks at the object also. It was in bad shape but still easy to identify.

"Looks like a piece of clothing or something."

"What're these brown spots on it?"

Mr. Tisherman looks at the brown blotches spread all over the tattered piece of someone's once nice shirt.

"I don't know. Could be . . ."

Mr. Tisherman hears a noise.

"Did you hear that?"

Mrs. Tisherman gives her husband a strange look.

"I didn't hear anything. What's the—"

Mr. Tisherman puts his hand over her mouth to keep her quiet.

"Shhhh. Hear it?"

Mrs. Tisherman listens intently for anything that sounds out of the norm. She is not disappointed. It sounds like something is shuffling through the leaves close by. Whatever it is, it was making a low-pitched grunting noise. Mrs. Tisherman speaks in a hushed voice.

“Sounds like it’s coming from over in those trees. I don’t see anything, though.” The sounds quickly disappear into silence.

The Tishermans stare intently at the trees where the sounds came from. There is no sign of life except their own heavy breathing.

“I don’t see anything either,” Mr. Tisherman whispered.

“It’s probably just an animal.”

His wife relaxes. Yep. That must be it.

“We’re disturbing it’s habitat.

Mr. Tisherman grabs his wife’s arm.

“Let’s get out of here before we do anymore damage.”

They had seen enough for now. They could always come back tomorrow on their way home from his brother’s place. Next time they’d get in and out of here quickly.

Mrs. Tisherman bends down to pick up the white swatch of tattered cloth.

“I’m taking this cloth with me to—”

She never gets to finish her sentence. In a flash of lightning quick speed, two sinister looking figures, with long claw-like nails, gouges out the eyes of the curious visitors. Next, their throats are slit. The dirtied cloth slips out of Mrs. Tisherman’s limp hand and falls gently to the ground. With her last breath of life, she hears something grunting with pleasure as it sucks the precious red blood out of her neck.

Delijah stuffs a tiny piece of sausage inside of her mouth and swallows it. She decided to eat a little, after all. She was really enjoying this particular group of guests. Especially the outgoing Latina woman named January. What a unique name. Delijah liked people who had unique names. They always seemed more interesting. January certainly didn’t disappoint in that department.

January had practically dominated the conversation by peppering Delijah with questions about the antiques they used to furnish the inn. In between questions, she would complement some aspect of the interior design and how exquisite Delijah’s taste was in selecting the various pieces. This January certainly knew how to kiss butt to get what she wanted.

While January talked, Delijah observed that her very lovely friend Rochelle seemed content to just relax and enjoy the atmosphere. There was something about Rochelle that reminded her of someone she and her brother held dear—someone who was, unfortunately, now emotionally unavailable to them both. The rest of the group was made up of the usual types that bored Delijah so much she barely acknowledged them.

Rochelle was surprised that one of the owners of this quaint inn had turned out to be so worldly. She could tell Delijah had been to many places Rochelle could only dream about. Not that Rochelle was a country bumpkin or anything, but she had never traveled far from her hometown of Rochester, except on rare excursions to New York, Washington, D.C. or other such places. Delijah had dropped hints of having traveled to places like Egypt, France and China.

Rochelle was intrigued by the lively Delijah and hoped she'd have a chance to speak with her again. It looked like dinner was wrapping up so she had better speak up and make herself known, before her host could write her off as someone unappreciative of good taste and conversation.

"Delijah. May I tell you that you've got a really lovely place here? And everybody's so nice," Rochelle said.

Delijah's piercing brown eyes landed on Rochelle again.

"Why, thank you. Rochelle is it?"

"Um hm."

"I'm glad you like it. My brother and I have worked so hard to make it inviting to people like you."

Delijah tried not to sound too condescending, but it was true. The inn had become a virtual mousetrap. However, instead of mice, it trapped mortals who supplied them with an endless source of delectable nourishment.

Rochelle looks around the room.

"Well, you've done a good job."

"Here here," January said.

These two have possibilities.

Strong possibilities of becoming a vampire, like herself. Delijah decided right then and there to make both January and Rochelle part of her "special selection"—those who would not be consumed, but considered viable candidates for the change. First though, she had to

find out what their plans were and make any necessary adjustments in their ideas about leaving.

“Will you be staying long, Rochelle?”

Rochelle smiled politely at her host.

“At least a week.”

Rochelle had decided to stay longer than intended, because January was staying at least that long to conduct some interior design research in the area. Maybe she'd even find this Darius Champion guy interesting as well, if she ever got to meet him.

Delijah turns her gaze on January, who was busy examining the chandelier.

“And what about you, January? How long will you be here with us?”

“Oh, I don't know. I was initially planning on staying here maybe a week, but now I'm going to be extending my stay just a little longer. This place is giving me a lot of inspiration. I can't wait to grab my sketchbook and draw some new designs.”

Delijah puts both elbows on the table and clutches her hands together.

“Good. Then you both will get an opportunity to fully enjoy our hospitality.”

Delijah picks up her wine glass full of dark red liquid that everyone assumes is a fine wine. She raises it in a toast to her guests.

“Here's to you all. Bon appetite!”

NIGHT OF THE HUNGRY

The escaped prisoner runs through the dark woods as fast as he can. Sweat pours down his face, which makes his clothes stick to his heaving body. The full moon illuminates his black and white striped jumpsuit. He hadn't had time to make it to his friend's house in town where a clean change of clothes awaited him.

Everything had gone according to plan up until now. He'd paid the guard a handsome bounty to look the other way while he slipped away from his prison work detail and into the woods. He was free again, and he intended to get out of the area as soon as he made it to a safe place.

A car would be waiting for him and all he'd have to do is get in and drive down south to Florida—or maybe he'd go west to San Francisco. He hadn't made up his mind yet, but he would definitely be leaving tonight. That is, as soon as he shook off whoever was following him right now.

Whoever or whatever it was, could run as fast as he could, that's for sure. He couldn't believe it was a guard or a cop. Not after what he'd seen back there. Earlier he'd grown tired after walking what seemed like miles so he had stopped to rest. He lay down next to a tree and took a short nap. It was dark when he woke up.

Next thing he knows he's awakened by this noise—a grunting noise. He immediately jumped up and hid behind the tree. He thought it was a bear that was sniffing around for its dinner. After his daring escape he wasn't going to become bear meat today.

As he peeked around to see the bear, he was instead startled by something much more alarming. It chilled him to the bone. At first he thought it was someone wearing a Halloween costume. All he could see was a dark hooded jacket covering a hunched over male body. When the person turned in his direction, he saw those eyes. They were red like fire and seemed to burn right through him.

That's when he took off. He wasn't going to hang around and wait for an introduction from this crazy person, or whatever it was. He was used to sensing danger because he grew up on the inner city streets. His instincts told him that he'd better run as far away from this thing as possible.

He was now growing tired and the footsteps behind him weren't slowing down. Soon that thing with the red eyes would catch up with him. He had to find a safe spot—fast. He spots a pile of leaves next to a huge fallen tree trunk. He decides to dash into the leaves and cover himself up. Maybe this weirdo will run past, and when it was safe, he'd run in the other direction.

As he's heading for the tree, an eerie deep voice calls out to him.

"It's no use to keep running from me. You can't escape. Just stay still and it'll be over quickly."

He stops cold in his tracks. How was this possible? He looks around but sees no one. There's no longer any sound of footsteps. The woods are quiet. He was beginning to get very frightened. How could he hear this male voice so clearly in his head that it sounded like the guy was standing right there in front of him speaking?

"Don't hurt me," he whispered. "Whatever you are, please . . . just leave me alone."

He didn't care if he went back to prison now. At least he knew what kind of human animals lived there. Out here he was completely defenseless. What kind of human being had such powers? All he knew is he wanted to get out of this alive.

"Stay still, mortal."

He was truly frightened now and shaking all over. Sometimes in prison he'd had nightmares about being chased by a movie monster.

"No. You're not real. It's just a dream."

He forced a short laugh. His mind was just playing tricks on him, that's all. He was just paranoid about being caught and his mind had made up this whole thing.

"Man, you're turning crazy."

Determined to prove himself right he steps out into the open and looks around again. There was no one in sight.

"Hello?"

No one answered. He was right. He'd imagined the whole creepy thing. He had woken up out of a half sleep and imagined that he'd seen some phantom looking at him. Ha! The guys in the joint would get a big laugh out of this one. But then he remembered that he wasn't going back there anytime soon. Not if he could help it anyway.

He decides to head back in the direction of town. He'd lost some precious time and knew his friend would be wondering if he'd made

it. Plus, the cops must be looking for him right now. After he had taken several steps, a sinister voice boomed out of the darkness.

“It’s not a dream, you jerk. It’s your worst nightmare.”

Suddenly, he feels a cold, clammy hand grip his shoulder. The grip feels like iron. He quickly turns around to see who or what this thing is and almost dies right there on his feet. The red eyes are burning into him as the monster’s sharp, white fangs bare down on his neck. The escapee lets out a piercing scream that no one hears but the creatures that inhabit these woods at night.

Pilar and Hutch sit in their rented room above the Ole Bar and Grill discussing the main issue on their minds.

“Is it safe to talk here?” Pilar asked.

Hutch looks around the room.

“Probably. However, these walls may have ears. We’ll use the code just in case.” Pilar knew what that meant. They’d used the code many times before when necessary.

“Okay,” she said. “So, how good do you think this hunting ground is?”

Hutch wrinkles his nose in thought. He had done his preliminary homework.

“I think we’re in prime territory for a big hunt.”

Pilar’s eyes widened at that.

“The quality of the game is good?”

Hutch smiles knowingly.

“The size and quality are excellent. I don’t think we’ll have any trouble spotting our prey. It’s a classic herding situation.”

Pilar knew a herd was good news.

“Good. I love it that they’re all together. It’ll make things easier.”

Hutch didn’t share her optimism.

“Not necessarily. This particular herd is very strong. We’ll have to do a lot more checking before we put out our traps.”

They both knew they were in for a challenge.

Rochelle lay on the cozy bed resting. Her eyes were closed, but she was fully awake. Her thoughts had drifted back to her recent tragedy. Must she think of it now? She so desperately wanted to free her mind of the funeral and seeing her beloved Everett lying stiffly inside his casket.

She heard heavy footsteps approaching her room. Rochelle opens her eyes and stares at the hallway through her open door. For no particular reason she was curious to catch a glimpse of the person who owned those footsteps. As the footsteps get closer, she sits up in anticipation of finding out what this person looks like.

However, as she strains to get a better look into the hallway, the footsteps stop just outside her door, but she sees nothing except a human shadow reflecting off the wall. She could tell it was a man, but that was all. The shadow lingers for a moment, and then mysteriously disappears. Rochelle blinks her eyes.

“Who’s there?”

Rochelle listens for the footsteps again, but hears nothing.

“How weird.”

She decides to lie down again and try taking a nap. Her mind must be playing tricks on her. Just as she closes her eyes, a knock at the door startles them open again.

“Hello?”

The cleaning lady peeks her head inside the door.

“Sorry if I disturbed you, miss. I just wanted to see if you needed anything.”

Rochelle relaxes at the sight of this nice woman. She glances over at her digital alarm clock. It was 9:02 pm.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

The cleaning lady nods and closes Rochelle’s door. Before moving on to the next room, she flips over the “Do Not Disturb” sign sitting on the doorknob so that everyone could see this guest wanted her privacy.

The small staff at the Sleepy Trail Inn enjoyed creating an atmosphere of old-fashioned fun for its guest. To this end, a weekly parlor game was held in the downstairs living room. This evening’s entertainment was a game of “Pin the Tail on the Monkey”—an

African-inspired derivative of the famous donkey game. Several adults were gathered in the parlor to participate in the fun.

A blindfolded female guest was being spun around and around in the middle of the room until she was about to lose her sense of balance. Next, she was passed back and forth from person to person to further disorient her. Finally, someone puts a fake monkey tail in her hand and everyone watches with amusement as she tries to find the monkey target, which sits on an easel.

The other guests shout “hot!” or “cold!” to let her know if she’s getting close or not. Everyone is having fun, including January Quinones, who is anxious to take her turn. After the woman sticks the pin into the monkey’s leg, she takes off her blindfold.

January grabs the blindfold and pulls it over her eyes.

“Gimme that tail thingy,” she said. “I’m gonna pin this sucker and show you guys how it’s done!”

They begin to spin January around and around.

Delijah, who is standing against a wall with the cleaning lady by her side, watches keenly as January stumbles around trying to find her target. Delijah leans over and speaks in a low voice to the cleaning lady.

“What else do we know about this January person?”

The cleaning lady shrugs.

“Not much. Except that she’s from New York City and she has a fancy job.”

Delijah’s eyes brighten as she stares at January.

“Fascinating.”

The cleaning lady doesn’t get it.

“What? This silly game?”

Delijah waves her hand at such ignorance.

“No. Her. I want you to make sure that January sits next to me at all the suppers.”

The cleaning lady finally understands Delijah’s intentions.

“Sure, mistress. I’ll let Karen know.”

The cleaning lady can’t wait to see what interesting things develop between these two boisterous women.

A young black boy unexpectedly greets Reg Nickerson as he comes back to the tool shed to put away his shovel. The shovel was covered with dirt and he was anxious to clean it off and get back to the house. Karen was waiting for him with dinner.

The boy was friendly and wide-eyed like most children are. He looked to be about ten or eleven years old. Reg wondered why he was out here and how much he had seen. The boy gives Reg a friendly wave.

“Hi.”

Reg greets the boy with mild annoyance.

“Hey, kid. What’re you doing here?”

The boy shrugs casually.

“I dunno. I got bored so I came outside.”

Reg gives the boy a stern look.

“You should be inside the house with the others.”

The boy takes an interest in Reg’s shovel and decides to change the subject. He wasn’t ready to go back just yet, and this adult looked like he was doing something interesting.

“How come you’re carrying that shovel?”

Reg thought quickly.

“I had to bury a dead rabbit.”

The boy was instantly fascinated by this news.

He wanted to know everything involved with this dead rabbit.

He thought of many questions to ask this stranger.

“Really? Was it a wild rabbit?”

“Yeah. I guess,” said Reg.

The boy was persistent. He liked rabbits and wanted to know more.

“Did you keep it as a pet? What did it die of?”

Reg was really annoyed now. He didn’t want to get into a long conversation about the rabbit or anything else with this boy. He just wanted to get rid of him—quick.

“Boy, you ask too many questions.”

The boy wasn’t put off by Reg’s brusqueness.

“Can you show me where it’s buried?”

Reg didn’t know why this child was allowed to be out here in the dark by himself, but he knew it was no place for him to be. He had seen this boy earlier at the inn with his father and had paused to watch them until the yearning in his soul became too deep.

“Why don’t you an your dad get on outta here? This inn ain’t no place for a boy like you to be,” Reg said.

The boy smiles brightly.

“I like it here. It’s fun.”

Reg shook his head. This place was anything but fun for humans.

“Boy. You’ve got no idea what you’re talking about. There’s all kinds of things here that . . .”

Just then, a man coming out of the darkness juggling several brightly colored balls in his hands interrupts Reg. The boy is immediately captivated by this new entertainment. The juggler stops in front of Reg and the boy and does several tricks with the balls.

“Wow! Look at that.”

The juggler senses he’s got an instant fan. He knew juggling fascinated most children. He decided to throw out a teaser to the boy.

“I bet you I can juggle these balls all the way back to the inn.”

The boy took the bait.

“Without dropping them? No way.”

The juggler looks at Reg then back at the boy. He figured the kid had been nosing around where he wasn’t wanted. Lucky he came outside to practice when he did. Reg looked like he was about to get real upset with this boy.

“Why don’t we find out?”

The juggler walks back towards the inn and the boy follows him the whole way. Reg watches them until they disappear behind some trees. The juggler reminded him of the Pied Piper. Leading children off to wherever he wanted them to go.

Reg hoped the boy and his father left there soon. Real soon.

Nina had finally stopped tossing and turning. She now slept peacefully in her bed as Nana Pham struggles to keep a drowsy eye on her. She jerks out of her dozing when Eric comes to check up on them.

“How is she?”

Nana Pham looks at her worried grandson.

“The same,” she says. Eric stares at Nina’s peaceful face.

“Will she walk?”

Nana Pham grabs Eric's hand.

"Probably. We must try to stay awake this time."

Eric knows this is true. They have failed every time to stay awake and prevent Nina from walking. This time he thought he had a solution. Even if Nana Pham fell asleep, he'd be alert to take care of Nina when she needed him most.

"I drank two big glasses of cola just for that purpose."

Nana Pham winks proudly at her seventeen year-old grandson.

"Good boy."

Jonathan Spangler opens his front door and looks around expectantly. When he sees there's no one coming up the walkway, he closes the door. He rejoins his wife at the dinner table. Her face sags when she sees his disappointed expression.

"Who was it?"

"No one," he says as he sits back down.

"Must've been kids playing around with the doorbell."

Moments pass as they eat their meal in silence. Suddenly, his wife breaks down and starts crying over her plate of baked chicken with mashed potatoes, gravy and string beans. The Reverend gets up and hugs her from behind.

"She'll be back. This is a good, strong Christian home. She always comes back," he said.

Lena Spangler shakes her head. She can't help but feel a sense of fear and hopelessness. Tears well up in her eyes.

"Not this time," she said. "I feel like we're losing her. Our baby . . . for good."

Reverend Spangler squeezes his wife's hand tightly. He knows he must remain strong for the both of them. He wasn't going to give up yet. He still had much faith that the good Lord would get them through this latest tribulation.

"Naw. Never happen. We've been through a lot together as a family, and we'll make it through again. The drugs—"

Lena Spangler became even more upset at what she thought he was going to say. "It's not the drugs anymore. She's been hanging around *them*."

The Reverend sits back down across from his beautiful brown beauty, as he often called Lena. They were a racially mixed couple. Years ago he had come to town to head up the new Baptist church here. He had almost immediately become smitten with the pretty, young choir director with the voice of an angel.

When she accepted his marriage proposal, it had caused a bit of a stir in some portions of town—even amongst members of his church. How could he, a white man of important social standing, marry a black woman? But, they persevered and both of them had built that church into a thriving spiritual sanctuary. He felt he and his wife could do anything they put their minds to.

Of course, things around there changed after the Champions and their vampire ways came to town. Many church members had become afraid and refused to attend services anymore. Their faith was being severely challenged by these unwelcome trespassers. Jonathan was determined not to let everything they'd worked for so hard destroyed by this evil.

"All we can do is pray," he said.

This seemed to give Mrs. Spangler a little bit of solace. She wipes her tears away.

"May God give us strength," she said.

Hutch bites into a big slice of pepperoni pizza. This was he and Pilar's first dinner together in several weeks. They sit on the floor with the pizza box between their legs. No table or plates even. The two of them enjoyed each other's company.

"This pizza was a good idea, hon," said Pilar between bites.

"For room service it ain't bad," Hutch said.

They had no choice but to order in. He didn't want to be seen around town too much.

"You mentioned something about a ceremony," Pilar said.

Hutch nods.

"Right. There's a secret ceremony taking place within the next few weeks or so. I've only gotten bits and pieces of it."

"Are you invited?"

"I hope not. It doesn't sound like something we'd want to be guests at."

Pilar smiles mischievously.

“More likely we’ll end up crashing the party.”

“Yep. First we need to find out more about it,” Hutch said.

“You think the Nickersons know anything?”

Hutch had told Pilar about the couple who ran the inn.

“Possibly,” he said.

“The husband is kind of standoffish. I’m not sure if he can be approached yet.”

Back at the Sleepy Trail, Rochelle was feeling inspired to write in her diary:

Nighttime is so peaceful at the Sleepy Trail. I feel pretty comfortable here. Even so, I keep getting this nagging feeling that there’s something more that I’m supposed to do. I can’t explain it. I’m getting a weird feeling that the walls here are listening to me. That sounds crazy. But it’s almost like—I was meant to be here.

The guests are just finishing up a delicious dinner of hamburgers and homemade French fries. None of the inn’s staff has joined them at the table. The inquisitive boy, who has made fast friends with the juggler, sits next to him while the boy’s father sits across from them keeping one eye on his son. Another guest at the table sighs and pushes his chair away. He pats his full stomach.

“That was a good meal. I’m stuffed.”

The woman next to him looks at her empty plate.

“Me too,” she said.

“I guess there’s nothing left to do but go to our rooms and collapse,” the man said. The boy’s father looks at his watch.

“That’s a good idea,” he adds. He looks at his son, who is playing with a blue plastic juggling ball.

“Some of us have got to get up early in the morning.”

The boy realizes that his father’s hinting it’s bedtime.

“Aw. Do I have to go to bed now, dad?”

He points a small finger at the juggler sitting next to him.

“He was gonna teach me how to juggle. Can’t I stay up another hour?”

The father shakes his head, knowing he was going to be the bad guy right now.

“No, son. We’ve got a long trip ahead of us tomorrow.”

The boy acted surprised to hear this news even though he knows every detail of their traveling plans.

“We’re leaving?”

“Yeah. We’ve stayed long enough. Say your goodbyes to everyone now.”

The boy decides to play the sympathy card and pokes out his lower lip. Now that he had discovered something fun to do at this old place, he didn’t want to leave.

“Bye, everybody. Nice knowing ya. My dad never let’s me have any fun.”

His father tries to hide his amusement at this tactic.

“That’s not true and you know it,” he said.

The juggler pulls a colorful book out of his satchel and hands it to the boy.

“Here’s a little gift for you. Since I can’t teach you myself, maybe it’ll help you learn the basic principles.”

The boy’s eyes widen with obvious pleasure.

“Wow. It’s a book on how to juggle. Cool beans!”

The boy flips through the pages of colorful illustrations. His father goes over and looks at the book over his son’s shoulder.

“What do you say to the nice man, son?”

He had taught his son to be respectful to adults and to always mind his manners. He figured his son had forgotten because of his excitement. The boy looks up at the juggler and speaks with sincere gratitude.

“Thanks. I’ll treasure this forever.”

Now there was only one thing he needed to complete his happiness.

“Dad? You’ve gotta buy me some balls.”

This innocent comment has all the adults in the room cracking up. His dad puts a steady hand on his son’s shoulder. Of course, he’d stop off somewhere and buy him some practice balls.

“Now I know what he’ll be doing in the car tomorrow.”

Outside on the inn's front porch, the Nickersons share a private moment together while gazing at the night sky. The full moon was glowing magnificently, which has Karen feeling very wistful.

"The stars are very clear tonight," she said.

"Um hmm," answered Reg.

Karen gazes up at the moon.

"I remember when we used to enjoy nights like these. We'd go out walking. We'd talk about all kinds of things."

Karen notices that Reg seems lost in his own thoughts. She tugs on his arm.

"Reg? Are you listening?"

Reg sighs tiredly.

"I'm sorry, honey. I've had a long day. All I wanna do is go to bed. Preferably right now."

Karen notices the bags under his eyes and knew that he'd be asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

"Maybe we should wait until all the guests turn in," she said.

She wanted to spend a little more time with him out here. They didn't get many peaceful moments like this.

"I'm sure it's okay if we go in early. This house can take care of itself at night," Reg said.

While Hutch and Pilar enjoy a local folk group's performance at The Ole Bar and Grill, Nana Pham and Eric are enjoying a deep sleep from within their chairs that sit next to Nina's empty bed.

12:42 a.m.

January and a cute young black boy sit in the parlor slumped over an ornately carved chess set. They're in the middle of what appears to be an intense game. January has her hand on her chin and keeps staring intently at the stubborn chess pieces. She can't figure out what her next move should be and she's becoming frustrated.

“Hmmm. You’ve got me stumped.”

The boy is way more relaxed than January. He beseeches her to make some kind of move. He’s been waiting for ten minutes already.

“Come on, January. It’s a really easy move,” he said.

January refuses to be rushed by this pipsqueak she fell in love with earlier in the afternoon.

“Don’t rush me now, boy. I’m still learning.”

She figured he was a smart kid, but maybe even *she* had underestimated him. He was supposed to be teaching her how to play chess. Now he was acting like a miniature chess champion.

“I forgot it takes older people longer to catch on,” he said.

January is ready to give him a scolding.

“I’m not *that* old. Besides, I shouldn’t be keeping you up anyways. Your daddy’s probably gonna come down here any minute and yell at both of us.”

The boy shrugs.

“He won’t yell at me for playing chess. He’s the one who taught me how to play. Just like his daddy taught him.”

January could see in his eyes that the boy was proud of the family tradition. Still, she was keeping him up past his bedtime, which might get him into trouble.

“But he *will* yell at you for disobeying him,” she said.

The boy couldn’t argue with that. He had snuck out of bed an hour ago to come down here and help January understand the game of chess. In reality, he just liked the idea of being around such a pretty lady. He was just at the age where his hormones were beginning to kick in. Girls weren’t so yukky anymore.

“True,” the boy said.

His dad might be mad, but he wouldn’t go ballistic or anything. Not after he saw how pretty January was.

“Here. Let me help you.”

January waves off the boy’s offer of help.

“Naw. I can do it myself.”

She went back to contemplating her next move.

After several minutes, the boy’s body clock begins to wind down and he’s getting sleepy. He knew he’d be nodding off soon. All he wanted now was to get back into his nice warm bed. He hated doing it but he had to put a quick end to this lesson.

"I'll be up all night if I wait for you!"

January was surprised at his sudden crankiness. *The kid must be getting tired*, she reasoned. She so desperately wanted to figure this out for herself, but she couldn't remember anything he had taught her about rooks, kings, or queens. She reluctantly gives in.

"Okay. Show me."

The boy is more than happy to oblige. He quickly instructs her on what to do. "You can move your pawn here, or your rook there."

January follows his instructions and makes the move. She looks up at him expectantly for approval. Instead, the boy counters with some quick moves of his own and takes one of her pieces in his hand triumphantly.

"I captured your knight. Ha ha!"

"You cheated!"

The boy cocks his head and grins. He had played a small joke on her.

"No I didn't. I said I'd help you. I didn't say you had a chance of winning."

January had to admit; the boy was pretty good to have suckered her in like that.

"You got me there, dude."

January feels a sudden chill enter the room. She rubs her arms and looks around the room with a sense of trepidation. Even so, she doesn't see anything out of the ordinary. Those dark corners were bothering her, though.

The boy notices her fearful glances.

"What's wrong?"

"Do you feel like someone's watching us?"

The boy looks fearfully around the room. He hadn't been afraid until he looked into January's eyes. Now his imagination kicked into gear.

"Maybe it's the boogey man."

January rolls her eyes.

"I'm serious."

Not seeing anything in the room with them, he relaxes and decides to ease the tension.

"Okay. It's not the boogey man. Maybe it's my dad. That's even worse."

January thinks he's a lucky boy to have such a caring dad in his life.

"Well, you'd better go up to bed young man. Thanks for teaching me how to lose at chess."

The boy bows his head to her.

"Your welcome. I'll play you anytime, anywhere. Cause I'm the greatest!"

January brushes off his bravado.

"Yeah, right."

The boy starts to leave, then turns around.

"Hey, January. Don't forget to come down and say goodbye to me in the morning."

January remembered the promise she made to him earlier. Even though she hated getting up early, she couldn't resist that cute little face.

"I won't honey. To make sure, I'll set my alarm for early sunrise."

The boy smiles then runs off to bed. Still spooked, January looks once more around the room. She decides to hurry upstairs to her own room before she really does see the boogey man.

Upstairs in a part of the inn that's off limits to guests; the cleaning lady brings a covered tray of food to one of the rooms tucked away in a corner. She takes a set of keys out of her pocket and unlocks the door. She looks around to see if anyone's watching before going inside.

Outside, Nina Pham walks silently up the porch steps and stands in front of the inn's door wearing nothing but her nightgown and a blank expression. Suddenly, the front door swings open all by itself and she walks inside.

A small lamp burns next to Rochelle's bed illuminating the book that she's reading while laying comfortably under the covers. It was one of those long-winded romance novels that she never had time to read. She was just getting to the juicy part when she hears the faint sound of piano music coming from somewhere downstairs.

The music is so beautiful that she is distracted from her story. Who here could be playing the piano at this time of night? Especially a kind of music that was so entrancing it was beginning to captivate her very soul. She just had to find out who was behind this rapturous melody.

Rochelle put her robe and slippers on and quietly enters the hallway.

Inside the inn's roomy parlor sits a beautiful black baby grand piano, which is always kept highly polished so that one can see their perfect reflection looking back at them when looking directly into its black finish.

Rochelle had never heard anyone play it since she arrived so she was doubly curious as to who could be so delicate and light with his or her fingers. The music seemed to be an extension of whoever it was. Their whole being was a part of its melodic rhythm. Just as she herself was being drawn under its spell.

Darius Champion senses the presence of that alluring female he'd snuck a peek at upstairs earlier in the evening. Her seductively musky scent preceded her by a full ten seconds. It was sweet and tantalizing in a way he hadn't experienced in a long while. He immediately decided he would pursue this new female object of desire, whoever she was.

His limber brown fingers played the last few bars of the Rachmaninoff concerto he'd memorized ages ago, then they rested calmly in his lap. He knew she was there looking at him. He could hear her delicate breath echoing throughout his highly sensitive ears. When he's ready, Darius looks up at Rochelle.

"Did I disturb your sleep?"

Rochelle is pleasantly surprised by the rich voice that came out of the handsome, thirty something man sitting at the piano. She was also instantly attracted to his physical attributes. He looked like a

male model right out of GQ magazine. He had velvety smooth brown skin—check; chiseled features—check; alluring eyes—check; lips that made you desire to kiss them—check, and to top it all off, long shiny braids that fell delicately down his back—double check.

Although, temporarily stunned by his masculine beauty, she manages to get a few words out.

“Oh no. You weren’t bothering me.”

Darius swings around so that his body was in full view for Rochelle. His slightly muscular physique is decked out in a copper colored t-shirt with a black jean blazer on top. He wears a pair of immaculate black jeans over his toned legs. His leather boots are also spit polished to a shiny black.

“I’m sorry if I was playing too loud. It’s just that I love this piece of music, and sometimes I tend to get carried away when playing it,” Darius said.

He motions for Rochelle to come closer.

“Come in. Don’t worry, I won’t bite,” he said.

Rochelle shyly walks closer to the piano. She stops just short of it several steps away. Her natural instinct was to be cautious around men she didn’t know, even one as nice looking as this piano player.

“Hi. I’m Rochelle Prescott. I’m staying here for a few days.”

Darius bows his head as a sign of respect for the lady.

“Pleasure to meet you, Rochelle. I’m Darius Champion.”

Rochelle already knew who he was.

“I know. I recognized you from your portrait hanging in the hallway.”

Darius had forgotten about that old portrait. Of course she’d seen it. Delijah had insisted they hang it there for all the guests to see.

He winces at the thought of it.

“Ugh, yeah. That horrible thing. I should take it down and commission a new one.”

He always said that, but somehow he never got around to actually doing it. Rochelle, on the other hand, didn’t share his viewpoint at all. She thought the portrait made him look like one of those dashing aristocratic gentlemen from another era. The outfit he was wearing in the picture looked old. Like ones she’d seen in historical films.

“I think it’s very flattering. It looks just like you.”

“It was done years ago. I’ve got much more character now than I had back then.”

Rochelle was trying to figure out how long ago was “back then”. The man in front of her didn’t look like he’d aged a day from the image portrayed on the wall. Darius strokes his smooth chin.

“The growth of a man’s character is a very important thing. Don’t you think?”

Rochelle senses that maybe Darius Champion was a bit full of himself. Maybe he was a rich brother who was used to getting his way. Well, she wasn’t going to drool all over him because he was cute and had money—at least not yet.

“The growth of any person’s character is important,” she said. “I think it comes from hardships, challenges, and sacrifices that we all make in life.”

Her willful answer to his question made Darius even more curious about this woman who had been drawn mysteriously to his music. He wanted to probe her a bit deeper.

“And what is your challenge, Rochelle?”

Rochelle became instantly guarded. She didn’t like the idea of sharing anything too personal about herself with someone she’d just met. Rochelle nervously fingers her cross pendant.

“I’ve got some, but I don’t wanna discuss it right now.”

Darius notices the small cross pendant gleaming in the dim light that came from a small corner lamp. It was just enough to illuminate the diamond in the middle. Crosses fascinated him for some reason and he leans forward to get a closer look.

“That’s a very pretty cross you’re wearing. Is it a gift?”

Rochelle looks down at her cross self-consciously.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. It is. From someone I cared about very much. It gives me comfort.”

Darius looks intensely into Rochelle’s soft brown eyes. They seemed so vulnerable.

“Is it the pendant, given to you by someone you love, or the religion behind it that brings you so much . . . comfort?”

“Both,” Rochelle said.

This seemed to tweak Darius’ interest even more.

“Do you mind if I see it up close?”

“Sure.”

Rochelle steps up a little closer to Darius and allows him to examine the cross with a discriminating eye. Rochelle was secretly pleased that he showed an interest in her pendant. Maybe he was a born-again Christian like her. If so, there might be a possibility of their getting to know each other on a deeper level—and not just for spiritual fellowship. Of course, she wasn't really looking for anybody so soon after Everett's death an all, but—there was something about this guy that made her think about changing her mind.

Darius continues admiring the cross.

"Good workmanship. Late European in design."

"I don't care about that," she said.

Darius pulls back and leans on his left elbow.

"Of course not. It's pure symbolism to you," he said.

This catches Rochelle off guard a bit.

"I beg your pardon?"

Darius had no intention of continuing this discussion right now. There would be plenty of time to share viewpoints with each other over the coming days and nights, especially nights. He swings himself back around on the piano seat and plays a few notes on the ivory keys.

"Don't mean to be rude, Rochelle, but I'd really like to get back to this piece of music. This is what brings *me* comfort."

Rochelle wonders if she'd said something wrong. His mood seemed to have changed so suddenly. One moment he was friendly, the next distant. Maybe he was one of those people who liked his privacy. Maybe that's why Delijah had dinner with the guests and not him.

As Darius began to play his music again, Rochelle felt awkward all of a sudden. "Sure. I . . . didn't mean to bother you. I'll just go back upstairs to my room."

Rochelle heads for the door feeling totally brushed off by Darius Champion. Maybe she wouldn't have a chance to speak to him again after all. This would probably be their only encounter. Way too brief for her liking.

Darius calls out after her.

"It was nice meeting you, Rochelle. We'll have to talk again."

Funny. She'd just been thinking that very same thing. Rochelle turns and looks at the gorgeous Darius Champion one more time.

“I’m sure we will, Darius. Good night.”

After Rochelle leaves the room, Nina Pham steps out of the shadowy corner where she’d been standing all along—waiting patiently for Darius to beckon her to his side. Darius stands up from the piano and holds his hand out for Nina to take. She silently grabs his hand and they stroll out together into night air for a walk under the moonlight.

Out on the front porch, the cleaning lady leans over the railing, quietly laughing as she watches Nina and Darius walk off. The full moon was always a special night for lovers, and, vampires who loved to bite into the necks of lovers. This thought seemed to amuse her to no end.

“Hungry, my blood-sucking friend? There’s plenty of hot young bodies around here to eat.”

Zoey enters Delijah’s bedroom from the adjacent bathroom hesitantly. She feels a bit silly as she tries to balance on three-inch high heels that she’s not used to wearing. The tight, powder blue silk nightie with the black lace trim she’s wearing makes her feel overexposed in ways she hadn’t counted on. Why did she have to wear this thing anyway?

Delijah was staring at Zoey’s voluptuous body with obvious pleasure.

“You look absolutely fabulous,” she said.

“Turn around so I can see all of it.”

Zoey reluctantly did as she was told.

It was Delijah’s idea for her to put on this uncomfortable outfit. She certainly would never have chosen such a lacy show-it-all-off thing like this to wear. Zoey turns around slowly so that Delijah can see the outfit at every angle. She was also careful to not trip over her feet in those heels.

“Do I know how to pick an outfit or what?”

Zoey shrugs her bare shoulders.

“I guess.”

Delijah notices Zoey's lack of enthusiasm.

"What's the matter? Don't you like it?"

Zoey looks at her image in the mirror.

"I think I look like a floozie from one of those lingerie catalogs."

Delijah dismisses Zoey's disapproval. She enjoys the way Zoey looked in this outfit and planned to get her more of them. She knew Zoey would wear them whether or not she wanted to. She would do it to please her, Delijah. Resistance was futile.

"Take it from me," Delijah said. "Those skinny models couldn't hold a candle to you."

Zoey looks down at her bare-skinned honey yellow legs and feet stuffed into the open toed black pumps with the feather decoration on top.

"I'm just not used to wearing something so girlish."

Zoey usually slept in an old t-shirt. She didn't see the need to wear these kinds of frilly things—except to please Delijah, of course.

"Well, I spent a lot of time picking that out for you. The least you could do is prance around."

Delijah wanted to see Zoey bring some excitement to the outfit like those cute models did on TV.

Zoey lets out a big yawn.

"I'm too tired to prance. I've had a long day."

"What could you have possibly done that makes you so tired?"

Zoey thinks for a moment. She tries to get her mind to remember anything beyond the last hour, but nothing comes up. It was a side effect of the heavy trances Delijah put her under.

"I don't know. I can't remember."

Delijah is forgiving of Zoey's forgetfulness.

"Zoey. Why don't you come sit on the bed next to me and look out at the beautiful full moon."

Delijah slides over to make room for Zoey.

"It'll make you feel better."

Without hesitation, Zoey walks over and sits next to Delijah on the bed. She looks outside at the full moon shining brightly in the pitch-dark sky. A twinge of memory flashes inside of her brain showing images of her dancing around in some field. She thinks it has something to do with the moon, but can't make more of it than

that. Delijah grabs a hold of Zoey's arms and gently pulls her body down closer to her eager lips.

Zoey feels Delijah's sensual lips kissing her neck and shoulders. Her kisses were gentle and delicate. Zoey feels a jolt of erotic electricity course through her upper body and down into her loins as Delijah continues her succulent kissing. She'd never felt anything so delicious as this. Where had Delijah been all of her life? She felt safe, protected and most of all—wanted.

No man had ever made her feel this desirable. She welcomed Delijah's caresses. Although she wasn't a lesbian, she found herself feeling completely captivated by this powerful woman. In fact, Zoey was willing to give Delijah anything she wanted at this moment—anything at all.

Delijah stops kissing Zoey's shoulders and moves up suddenly onto the soft area of her neck. It was a strong neck, Delijah thought. Nice and strong. The way she liked them. Its veins were rich with the nectar of life. Delijah could no longer hold back her ravenous desire. She pulls Zoey's head back and digs her eager fangs into her beloved's delicate flesh.

The red nectar burst onto her tongue in small drizzles as Delijah makes short, sucking motions with her lips. This was a very good evening indeed.

6:12 a.m.

While only partially awake, January walks into the dining room expecting to see the young boy she played chess with last night and his father. Karen is already sitting at the table by herself having a cup of coffee.

"I'm glad somebody's up besides me," January said.

Even at this early morning hour, Karen Nickerson seems as cheery as ever. She was expected to always be pleasant to the guests, no matter what hour in the day it was. Karen flashes January a radiant smile.

"Good morning, January. What're you doing up so early?"

January looks around at the empty room. She scratches her scalp through her mass of untamed hair.

“I’ve been asking myself that for the past ten minutes.”

Karen desires to make January feel comfortable.

“Have a seat. Would you like some coffee?”

“Um hm. Black is fine.”

Karen pours January a cup of fresh roasted coffee. January sips the strong brew and gradually becomes more awake after a few minutes.

“I guess you can tell I’m not a morning person. Actually, I’m looking for that cute little boy and his dad. You know, the one who liked that juggler.”

“Really?” Karen said.

“I promised him I’d say goodbye before he left.”

Karen’s face dropped suddenly.

“Oh. Sorry to tell you this, but they’ve already left.”

“What?”

January’s tired eyes find the antique clock that sits on the mantelpiece.

“It’s six twenty in the morning. What’d they do, get up at the crack of dawn?”

Karen didn’t seem to know anything more than the bare facts.

“All I know is that their room’s empty. You remember how anxious the dad was to get on the road.”

January was extremely disappointed to hear this news. She had really wanted to see that little wise guy one more time. She’d wanted to exchange emails with his father so that they could keep in touch.

“I know, but couldn’t he have waited until a decent hour? Gee. I hope the kid’s not mad at me.”

Karen was reassuring.

“I’m sure he’s not.”

January spots something lying at the end of the table.

“Hey, what’s that?”

Karen sees the object, but doesn’t have a clue except that it’s some kind of book.

“What?”

January goes over and picks up the book that she recognized from the night before. “It’s my little wise guy’s juggling book. I can’t believe he’d leave this behind.”

Karen tries to dismiss her concern.

“He probably forgot it.”

“Yeah, but he was very excited about it. There’s nothing in the whole world he wants to do more than learn how to juggle.”

Karen didn’t know what had happened to the little boy, but she knew she’d better squash any suspicion January had about his early disappearance. She couldn’t afford to have a guest asking too many questions.

“Well, you know how kids are. What’s exciting today is old news tomorrow.”

January nods in agreement, but is still bothered by a little nagging doubt in the back of her mind.

“Uh huh.”

Was all she would say for now.

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