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The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

The Chronicles of
Nightfire,
Texas

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The Chronicles of
Nightfire,
Texas

CHAPTER 3

VICTORY OF THE VAMPIRE

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas #3
“Victory of the Vampire”

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CHAPTER 3

VICTORY OF THE VAMPIRE

It was 2:00 A.M. by the time Bradley had dropped Sam and Ray off and was headed home himself. He was more than ready for bed, and yet he didn't see himself getting any sleep this night. So many things were racing through his mind. He was miserable over the strangeness he was being put through with Ann. Well, Ann's mother anyway. He felt that his head might burst if he didn't get some answers. Why wouldn't she speak to him? What had gone wrong? Of course, it was clear that things were going to be different between them since they'd decided to make love, but why should it drive her away? It had been her idea in the first place.

Bradley was also concerned about this mysterious Valen Alexas. It was very possible that Ray had been correct. Valen could be Nightfire's mass murderer. Which meant that Ray was in trouble, and so was Sam, for both had opened themselves to further contact with the man. And Ray had been bold enough to accuse him to his face. Bradley hoped that Ray was wrong and that the whole thing would blow over. He thought about his father and his older brother, and then he considered this mass murderer. He thought about Ann. He breathed out a sigh and spoke to himself softly, "I just couldn't stand to lose anybody else right now."

A thought suddenly struck him as he turned onto his street. "I hope Mom didn't wait up." He snickered to himself. He hadn't intended to stay out so late, but the comfort and the conversation of his friends had been so wonderfully addictive.

Bradley pulled up slowly to his driveway. *That's funny*, he noted. *The lights are on inside Mom's car. Oh, shit!* A pair of legs had come into view, lying outstretched beside the car. Bradley stopped the car in front of the driveway, turned it off, and bolted out to his mother's car.

“Mom! Mom!” He ran to her side, fearing the worst. He knelt down beside her and shook her, only to scream out in horror at the sight of her shredded throat. “Oh, God! Oh, fuck!” Bradley felt numb all over. He was sobbing before his next heartbeat, and, indeed every heartbeat seemed now to last an eternity. He was praying silently, begging God to wake him from this nightmare. *Maybe she’s still alive. Maybe she’s okay.* He closed his burning eyes and took a deep breath before again braving a look at her. Her skin was pale like snow, and her beautiful green eyes were staring wide with fear, not seeing anything; never to see again. Bradley was trembling violently. He couldn’t think. He sobbed, reached down to take her hand, and found it holding a card.

He knew exactly what had happened.

He pulled his hand away and fell on his backside. “Oh, God ...,” he murmured, just before he keeled over and vomited in the grass. Bradley had never felt shock quite like this; not when his father had died from a heart attack in the hospital; not even when his brother had been

sent home in a box from Vietnam. This was the greatest horror he had ever known.

“Bradley!”

The voice of his little sister shocked him again, back to the rest of the world. “Fuck! Kate! Stay in bed!” He looked around frantically for her and was relieved to find that she was calling from her bedroom window. She couldn’t see her mother from that particular angle. “Just go to sleep, Kate!”

“But you were screaming. What’s wrong?”

A light caught Bradley’s eyes, as his little brother’s bedroom window began to glow. Bradley was frantic. “Fucking go to sleep! I just tripped. I’m okay. Tell Brendan to get the fuck back to bed! Now!”

“Do you need me to get Mom?”

Bradley felt his heart split. “Oh, God. Fuck ... no! No! I’m all right! I’ll be upstairs in a minute to tell you all about it. And you and Brendan better fucking be in bed with all the lights out, or I’ll tell ... I’ll ... I’ll just tell. Fuck! Put Brendan in bed!”

The little girl’s voice rang out in irritation, “Fuck! I will! Watch your filthy fucking mouth!”

Satisfied that his sister was on task, Bradley tried not to look at the body before him. He needed to get moving. He needed to act. But then, he *needed* to look at her again. He needed to be sure. Maybe he had seen wrong. Maybe he had been tricked by the light. He looked down into her lifeless eyes; he glanced over her ivory white skin. “Oh, God!” He felt dizzy, as he rocked back and forth on his haunches. “Move, Bradley. Do something. Fucking move!” He banged a fist on the side of his mother’s car, and he let out a defiant scream, as he rose to his feet, still weeping. He marched, quivering with terror, over to the neighbors’ house, and he pounded on the door.

Mr. Jones opened the door in his robe a few minutes later, put on his glasses, and took in the disheveled sight of Bradley. “Bradley! What’s the matter, son?”

Bradley couldn’t make himself speak for a moment. His eyebrows rose, and his lips began to tremble. He took in a shaky breath and blurted out meekly, just before breaking into sobs again, “My Mom’s dead.”

Suddenly Mr. Jones was all the strength Bradley was so desperate for. He grabbed the youth and held him close, letting the boy soak his shoulder with his tears.

His wife had quietly emerged from the shadows behind him. "Carl, what's happened?"

Mr. Jones barely turned his head to regard his wife. "I need you to call the police and send them over to the Stevens' house."

Her eyes went wide. "What ...?"

"Please, dear, hurry. Then go see that Eleanor hasn't been frightened by the knocking."

She looked at him, clearly frightened but needing to understand more.

"Mrs. Stevens needs help."

"Oh. Oh, my! I'll call Will Cody at home." She hurried off, dragging the hallway phone by the cord, as she spoke into it, over to their four-year-old daughter's bedroom door.

While Mrs. Jones was on the phone, Carl led Bradley into the kitchen and sat him down at the table. "Bradley, what happened? Tell me, son."

Bradley looked up in agony. "She's ... Someone did this. Someone hurt her bad." He spoke in a near whisper through phlegm he hadn't the will

to clear, "It's the killer." Carl's eyes went wide, just as Bradley's did, and the young man jumped up. "Brendan and Kate!"

Carl put a hand on the youth's shoulder and pushed him gently back to his seat. "I'll go for them, Bradley. Are they all right?"

"Yes. Kate was talking through her window, asking me what was wrong ... I didn't tell her."

"That was wise."

"Brendan's light came on, but I didn't hear him say anything."

Suddenly the possibility that it hadn't been Brendan who'd turned on the light dawned on both men, and their faces showed it.

"Oh, God! He could be in the house! He could be in there with my brother!" Bradley stood back up. "I have to get them out!"

"No!" Mr. Jones spoke sternly. "You're in no condition. I'll go."

"Go where?" asked Mrs. Jones, who'd just walked into the kitchen carrying their sleeping daughter.

"Susan, did you get the police?"

"Yes. What's going on, Carl? I'm scared."

Mr. Jones said nothing at first, looking down, considering how much to tell his wife at this moment. “Susan, don’t worry. I’m going next door to get Brendan and Kate. Lock the door behind me, and don’t open it until I knock and you know for sure it’s me.”

Susan was getting irritated. “Carl—”

Bradley spoke up. “Go through the back. You can’t take them through the front. Please, I don’t want them to see her.” The young man looked pleadingly to his neighbor.

“Carl, what is wrong with Audri?” She took in the silence, the way that her husband avoided her eyes, the positively stricken look of young Bradley Stevens, and her intuition kicked in. “Oh my God. Carl, wait for the police! They’ll get the kids out. You can’t go over there, he might still —”

Carl cut her off sharply, “He might still be in there, and I’ll never sleep again if I just stand by and wait for the police while that monster butchers those little children. Lock the doors. I’ll be right back.” Carl opened the sliding glass door to their backyard, and he picked up a baseball bat. He kissed his wife gently on the lips, and he

kissed his daughter on the head, then he headed out.

Susan locked the door and closed the drapes, holding her daughter tightly.

Bradley felt his mind slipping. He just knew that he would never get over this. He kept drifting to practical thoughts, then stopping himself, not wanting to be in this moment. *How are we gonna eat? I suppose I could ...*

How am I gonna pay for a funeral? I'll have to call

...

How am I gonna tell Brendan and Kate? God ...

Bradley stood abruptly and started pacing in the small kitchen, nearly oblivious to the presence of the mother and daughter just beside him.

"Bradley," Susan offered, "I'm so sorry."

He stopped pacing and regarded Mrs. Jones as though she were the strangest thing he'd ever seen.

"I'm so glad you came to us. If there's ... If there's anything we can help with ... I just want you to know that you have friends here, Bradley."

The youth considered her words, then managed to choke out a, "Thank you." He had to stop speaking then, for fear of losing control of

his tears. He passed the minutes by in agony, wanting it all to end.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Jones jumped. “Oh!”

“I’ll go look,” Bradley insisted. He went to the back door and peeked through the curtains. It was Mr. Jones, with his brother and sister. Bradley felt such relief as he threw back the curtains and opened the sliding glass door, that he almost shouted aloud.

The three entered the house, and Mr. Jones closed the door behind them. “Everybody’s here, Susan. Let’s make some hot chocolate.”

“Yeah!” Came little Eleanor’s enthusiastic shout from her mother’s arms. “What’s going on, Mommy?”

Bradley knelt down and embraced his young siblings tightly.

“Bradley,” Brendan asked, “what is going on?” The boy looked scared, as though, deep down inside, he already knew what Bradley was holding back.

Still, he didn’t look nearly as frightened as Kate. “Where’s Mom?” she blurted.

Bradley could see she was on the verge of tears. She knew something was terribly wrong.

Bradley sat back, his eyes began to water, and he blinked rapidly, trying to speak through the pain in his throat. "Look, guys ... um ... something happened ..." He stopped and stood, interrupted by the sounds of a police siren and the flashing of lights through the window.

"What's happening?" asked Eleanor, still refused answer by her clearly frightened mother.

"Everybody sit still," came the calming voice of Carl Jones. "I'm gonna go talk to the police officers, and we'll clear everything up when I get back." He looked to Bradley. The boy looked as though he were ready to burst through the wall to get out there. "Bradley, you wanna come outside with me, or do you wanna wait here till I come back?"

"I'm coming with you." Bradley hurried to the front door, and he was outside before Mr. Jones had even managed to leave the kitchen.

“Oh my god.” Dirk was standing beside the body of Audri Stevens. He looked to Sheriff Cody.

“Looks like our poker game wasn’t interrupted for nothin’ after all,” came the sheriff’s reply. “My God ... Audri. Those poor kids. They’ve been through Hell and back already. Now this.”

Dirk knelt down for a closer look. “There’s something in her hand.”

“Well, that figures, Dirk. There’s been somethin’ in all their hands.”

“Sheriff Cody!”

Will Cody looked to see Bradley Stevens running at him from the Jones’ house, followed by Carl. “Bradley, stay back, son.”

Carl shouted, “You’re not gonna be able to stop that kid if you run ’im over with a bus. He’s the one who found ’er, Sheriff.”

Sheriff Cody’s heart sank at the revelation. How tragic for that poor boy, who’d known so much pain in his life already. “I’m sorry, son. All

we can do is find whoever did this and see that he gets what's comin'."

Anger filled Bradley's whole being, and he thought back to Ray's accusations at Dan Parker's. "Then arrest Valen Alexas! He's the one! He's the killer! He has to be!"

The sheriff wanted to hear more, but he had to treat anything relating to Valen Alexas with special caution. "Why's that, Bradley? Did you see somethin'?"

Bradley was growing frustrated, and he spoke through gritted teeth, fists clenched at his sides, "No ... but ... he has a wolf."

The sheriff still wanted to hear more, but his curiosity remained apprehensive. "Look, son. It's complicated. I got a visit from the mayor on account of Mr. Alexas stayin' in our town. Now, I'm not sayin' I'm necessarily gonna comply, but he gave me and my department a strict order to stay outa Valen Alexas' way. Said it had somethin' to do with agreements signed with the town's founders a hundred-aught years back."

He saw the outrage on the youth's face. "Now, I *will* look into this, son. If there's a chance Valen Alexas is a cold-blooded killer, then

to Hell with the mayor's order. I'm learnin' more an' more that this town is just plain peculiar. There's special allowances left an' right. The town government ain't even like most towns. There was some weird shit goin' on back in the last century whenever *whoever* put this town together, and there's a lotta secrets. That makes me plenty uncomfortable, 'cause I ain't privy to any of 'em.

"All I know's that we have to be careful how we handle Valen Alexas. Sheriff Gilespe violated an order from the mayor like this, and next thing ya know feds are all over 'im. Now he's in the nut house. Like I said, I don't know what this secret contract's all about, but I know better than to stick my dick in it."

Bradley wasn't the least bit impressed. "Look, he has a wolf! I know that you've found wolf hair at the scene of each murder! Nobody else in Nightfire has a wolf! People have seen him. He walks around with it. I saw him just tonight at Dan Parker's. He had the wolf with him then! These murders started as soon as he got here! You have to do something, or he's gonna just keep killing!"

“If you saw him and the wolf at Dan Parker’s—”

“He left a long time before I did. You can ask Sam and Ray. He said he had some business to take care of or something! Please, Sheriff Cody! You have to do something tonight! My Mom!” Bradley pointed, without looking, to the spot where Audri lay. He covered his face.

Sheriff Cody could no longer look the boy in the eyes anyway. “Look, Bradley. I know you’re hurtin’, but the fact is, we need more to go on. We don’t have anything at *this* crime scene to point the finger at Valen Alexas, ’cept some half crazy, grief-struck kid. You need to be patient and let *us* figure this one out.”

Bradley stomped past the sheriff. “Fuck you then!” He got in his car and started the ignition.

“Now hold on a minute, son! Where in Hell do ya think yer goin’?”

Without reply, Bradley hit the gas, squealing the tires as he drove away.

“God damn it!” Will Cody shouted at the top of his lungs. “Where in Hell is that kid goin’ off to?”

“Sheriff,” Carl offered, worry in his voice, “if that were your mother laying there on the pavement, and you thought you knew who did it, where would *you* be headed right now?”

Will thought for a moment. “Shit. You don’t think that kid’d be crazy enough to ... this is nuts! I hate shit like this! Nightfire’s s’posed to be a nice, quiet little town! So why does this weird shit always come up! We don’t even have anything here that *points* to Valen Alexas.”

“Uh ... Sheriff?” came Dirk’s worried voice.

“What is it, Dirk?”

The younger man held something up in his hand. “It’s wolf’s hair, sir. Same species as at the other scenes.”

“Well, shit in my Corn Flakes! I guess we have to go retrieve Bradley, before he gets himself killed. Why couldn’t I have at least been *winnin’* that poker game before we came out here? It never fails; when it rains, it pours.”

Bradley sped down the dirt road leading to Alexas Mansion and slammed on the brakes right at the front porch. He turned off the ignition,

slammed the car door, and marched up the stairs. For the entirety of the drive, Bradley had been of only one mind—the mind of vengeance. His mother was dead, and he would have satisfaction with her killer.

All the first-floor lights were on, which didn't surprise Bradley at all. He stood at the door, shaking slightly with anger, trying to collect himself, wondering just exactly what it was that he was going to do.

Inside, Valen, having seen to all his nightly tasks, was relaxing with a book, and giggling, in his living room. He was lounging in nothing but a white T-shirt and a brand-new pair of bell-bottom jeans, which was not his normal style. He had been thinking about his wardrobe though, and he felt home was the best place to get comfortable with a new look. He knew that Julius would have mocked his paranoia, but Valen was worried that his other clothes made him look too old, and he wanted to look as young as possible. Perhaps it *was* as ridiculous as Julius thought, but

Valen was always worried about how old he looked, one way or the other.

It was awkward at times, being in his unique situation. He was head of the corporate empire that was Alexas Enterprises, and yet he was so youthful. In business meetings, which he generally only sent a representative to, but sometimes couldn't avoid, Valen would always worry that he didn't look old *enough*. It wasn't easy gaining respect from men who saw him as a mere boy; the unappreciative, undeserving heir to the Alexas fortune. He knew that many of them saw him this way. He'd heard them speaking in the halls.

In Nightfire, however, it was the other way around. It wasn't respect he sought from the people here, but friendship. He worried that his overly mature mannerisms and all-business way of dressing would prevent him from fitting in with the young people he was most likely to click with. And he needed friends here, since he would surely be staying for a long time, and he wanted to have some semblance of normalcy. Though, he had to admit, he was anything but normal, which is why such things had always eluded him.

Valen finished a chapter, still giggling, and he put the book down. It was his favorite, even alongside all of all the classics he'd read, and it never failed to make him laugh. The book was called *Through Texas on a Mule*, and Valen had taken it with him on all of his own recent travels, relating to the main character, who wandered the state with his faithful yellow mule, just barely getting by and meeting a variety of strange people along the way.

Valen thought about his old friend Tex McCoy, whom he'd last seen in Amarillo. He worried, for surely his enemies would think to use his friends against him. But Julius had given his word to take care of the people Valen himself could no longer look after.

Valen looked over at Raksha, who sat alertly looking to an empty chair, as though someone were sitting in it. He was concerned about Raksha's behavior since they'd arrived in Nightfire. It was unnerving how she went about the house, every now and again seeming to react to the invisible. It wasn't something Valen wanted to think about in this great old house.

The chair that held her attention suddenly moved, ever so slightly, and a chill went through Valen, for he was sure his pet wolf hadn't touched it.

Then Valen's heart nearly leapt out of his chest, when he heard the thunderous, violent knocking at his front door.

Raksha snarled and bolted to the front of the house.

Valen quickly followed. He stood beside the growling wolf and looked through the peephole. He was greatly relieved, and somewhat elated, to see one of Sam's friends; someone he'd hoped to get to know in time, after seeing him earlier that night at Dan Parker's, at the table with Sam and Ray.

Bradley saw the shadows approaching through the curtains by the door. He didn't care if this guy *ever* understood, he was just going to kill him. He had blind rage to back him now, and nothing would stand in his way. The more he thought it over, the angrier he became.

The locks turned, and the door opened slowly, revealing a quietly growling wolf, beside the brightly smiling Vampire Killer. Valen spoke with a welcoming voice, as though two or three in the morning was a wonderful time to have strangers pop by, “Hello! I didn’t catch your name, but—”

“Catch this, mother fucker!” Before he even realized what he was doing, Bradley’s fist met Valen’s face and knocked the man back. Satisfaction only began to course through the young man’s being as he made ready to hit him again, and again, and again ... but Raksha wouldn’t have that.

Before Bradley could even raise his fist again, the wolf was in the air; then Bradley was on the ground, the wolf on his chest. It was all a blur, and the sound of the beast’s threatening snarl was all there was in the world.

Then, “No! Raksha! Stop!” There had been panic in the man’s voice, as though he didn’t think the wolf would hear him.

As the silence set in, only then did Bradley realize that the monster’s teeth were on his throat. The wolf had stopped barely an instant

away from killing him. As horrifying as this moment should have been, somehow, Bradley didn't even care. He was shocked, but he was undeterred.

The wolf backed up, slightly, still on Bradley's chest. It began growling again, as the boy stirred.

"Raksha!" The man was pleading. "It's okay, girl. I can handle him."

Raksha looked to her master, as though to ask him, *Are you sure?* Valen nodded, and, after granting Bradley one more threatening show of her fangs, she turned and went to her master's side.

Bradley slowly raised himself up on his elbows and coughed, only just realizing that the wind had been knocked out of him. He spoke venomously, "I hate you. You bastard. I'm going to kill you."

Raksha began to growl again, ready to spring forth once more.

Valen looked warningly at her and asked the youth nervously, "Why?"

Bradley sat up fully then, and he got to his feet, trying to look threatening, trying not to see

the vicious wolf. "Because ... the woman you ...," he started to cry, and he detested himself for it, "... killed tonight. The woman you ... ripped apart at the throat with your fucking pet wolf ... she was my mother. You fuck! You killed my mother." Bradley stepped towards Valen, and the wolf snorted, but was cut short by an order from her master.

"Raksha," Valen spoke sternly, without even giving her a glance. "Go."

The beast looked stricken, insulted. Her eyes seemed to ask, *You dismiss me?* Still, she obeyed, and she walked sulking into the house, tail between her legs, as she melted into the shadows. Clearly, Raksha was not happy with the idea of leaving Valen to fend for himself. Clearly, she was well trained to protect him.

Valen stepped out onto the porch and stared directly into Bradley's glistening, tearful eyes. Valen couldn't blame him for the accusation. He'd heard the reports himself. There was wolf hair found at the scene of each crime. As far as he knew, there were no other wolves in Nightfire. Of course this pointed to him. He had to act quickly. He had to escape suspicion. Of course,

he was protected by the agreements made between the town founders in the early days of Nightfire, and he knew it, but if they didn't think he was standing by his part of the deal, surely they'd go over his head. Surely they'd protect themselves. Bradley's eyes went wide, locked to his own, and Valen knew that he had him.

Bradley felt an inner warmth come over him; a calm. Something in Valen's eyes. Something so ... hypnotic. He didn't want to look away.

"What's your name?" Valen asked calmly.

"Bradley." Where was his anger? Bradley was dazed. He knew he should feel angry, but the anger wasn't there. All he wanted to do was answer Valen's question. "Bradley O'Denehy Stevens."

Valen smiled. "Well, Bradley O'Denehy Stevens, I'm glad to know your name. Now, you must listen to me. I know you're in pain. I lost my mother too ... when I was very young." Pain crept into Valen's heart. This was not something he liked to think back on. In fact, because of how terribly she'd died before his eyes, Valen did not like thinking back on her at all. "You must

believe me, Bradley. I killed no woman this night. I know Raymond accused me, and I see where you might suspect it, but I am not this mass murderer.”

Bradley let the words sink in. If ever there were a sound of truth, it was in Valen’s smooth voice. Valen couldn’t have killed his mother. It had to have been someone else. Bradley couldn’t think clearly, though. All he could do was look into Valen’s seductive, blue eyes. It was as if the eyes were speaking to him themselves, and they could have convinced him of anything. But, if Valen didn’t kill his mother, who did?

My mother is dead.

This thought suddenly tore Bradley’s eyes away from Valen’s. He looked down and put a hand to his face as he sobbed. “My mom is dead!” He let out a growl of his own, sounding much more dangerous than the wolf in the shadows of the house. “Something has to be done!” He looked back to Valen, who was shedding silent tears, perhaps in sympathy. Or perhaps he was remembering his own mother’s death. “My mom is dead, and I don’t have anybody. What am I gonna do! How am I gonna

take care of my brother and sister? What're we gonna do?" He broke down completely, repeating through sobs, "What're we gonna do?"

Valen went to the youth and held him.

Bradley couldn't fight it. He needed to be held, by anyone. He couldn't remember what he'd come here for. He couldn't remember anything at the moment, except that his mother had been murdered ... and Valen's magical eyes.

Bradley got hold of himself then, and he let go of the older man and stood back, wiping his eyes and sniffing. He remembered why he'd come then. "I'm sorry ..." He looked at the man and didn't quite know how to address him. Earlier the man had clearly looked like a Mr. Alexas, but now, he looked boyish, like a 'just Valen' sort of man, a little younger than Ray. "I'm sorry ... Valen. I don't know how I could have thought ..."

Valen put a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, Bradley. I'd forgive you for anything the state you're in." He felt such a need to nurture this boy. He remembered the agony when he'd lost his own mother so long ago. Even though the circumstances had been greatly different, they

were similar enough that Valen wanted to wash Bradley's pain away. He could easily imagine the sorrow that he felt.

Just then a police car drove up the road and parked beside Bradley's car. Both doors flew open, and Sheriff Cody and Dirk stepped out, looking as all-business as they could manage.

Will Cody spoke cautiously. "Mr. Alexas ... Bradley ... Everything alright here?" His hand hovered by his gun, and he didn't care if it was obvious.

Bradley spoke, as Dirk went boldly up the steps of the porch beside him, "Sheriff Cody! I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I fucked up."

The two law men exchanged suspicious glances. The sheriff said, "I just wanna be sure, Bradley. What changed your mind?"

This question seemed to startle Bradley, as though he had never considered that before. "I ..." He looked to Valen. "I don't know. I just know it wasn't Valen. It couldn't have been."

Dirk spoke up, "Mr. Alexas ..."

"Valen, please," the owner of the great house replied.

Dirk indulged the man. “Valen ... do you mind if I take a look at your wolf?”

At this, Sheriff Cody actually put his hand on his gun and gripped it, ready to pull it from its holster in an instant if the need arose.

Valen regarded the police officer on his porch. He knew this could be trouble, and his nervousness showed. He wasn't sure how he would react if they took Raksha, or if they decided to arrest him. All he knew was that he would not allow himself to be taken into custody under any circumstances. And he knew that these policemen knew nothing about the agreement that protected him, or else they'd have steered clear, fearing for their very lives if anything should happen to him. For now, all Valen could do was play along and hope it didn't come to that. He called nervously into the house, “Raksha! Come here, girl.”

The wolf came quickly, eager to get a closer look at the new arrivals; eager to size them up. She'd been eavesdropping long enough.

Valen gave her a look that spoke volumes. Volumes which only the wolf could read.

“Raksha, girl. Introduce yourself to this nice policeman.”

The wolf looked up at Valen, understanding in her golden eyes, and she walked over to Dirk.

He kneeled down and rubbed her neck. “Hey, you’re a pretty girl, aren’t you?”

As Dirk sat admiring the beast, Sheriff Cody started to lose his patience. “You live alone here, Valen?”

Valen regarded him with forced calm. “Just me and the dog, sir.”

“That’s not a dog, son. That’s a wolf. And there’s a vast, unfriendly difference between the two. A wolf ain’t nothin’ like a dog, ’cept maybe in looks. Wolves are killers. And you may have heard, we’ve got ourselves a killer in Nightfire.”

Dirk spoke up, “Wolves are smarter too. My sister Sheryl works with wolves up in New Mexico. She tells me they have to put locks on all the pins, because, unlike dogs, the wolves watch their keepers closely. They learn real fast how to open the pins themselves. They don’t have to see a person do it more than twice. Dogs can see someone open the gate a hundred times without figuring it out.” He regarded the wolf he still

petted. “Isn’t that right, girl? I bet you’re smart.” He looked to Valen. “Of course, this also means that the wolf is not easy to tame. How long have you had Raksha here?”

Valen answered, “Four years. I raised her from a pup.”

“Well, she seems friendly enough, tame enough, but I know for a fact, it’s all just an act. You can’t make a dog out of a wolf, man. No matter how housebroken she is, she’s still a wild animal.” He stood and spoke to the sheriff. “These facts considered, Raksha still hasn’t gone near any of the murder victims.”

Sheriff Cody stammered, not having expected that declaration from Dirk. “What’re you talkin’ about, Dirk? How can you say that fer sure just by lookin’ at it?”

Dirk shrugged as he walked down from the porch. “She’s the wrong species of wolf. We’re looking for a red wolf. Raksha here’s a gray wolf. You know my sister’s in town, staying with my parents, right? She identified the wolf hair for me a couple days ago. She researches wolves for a living.”

Sheriff Cody was irritated. “Damn it, Dirk, why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“We didn’t have a suspect earlier. Now we know. There has to be another wolf. And it has to be a pet wolf. ’Cause, I know wolves are smart, but no wolf is gonna be smart enough to put a picture of a movie vampire in each of the victims’ hands.”

“Damn it, Dirk! What’s wrong with you, son! Next time, you tell me all the unimportant details ’soon as you know ’em.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry.” He grinned, clearly impressed with himself.

The sheriff looked up to the porch. “Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Alexas. I hope Bradley didn’t wake you.”

“No.” Valen was laughing with relief. “I’m something of a night owl anyway.”

“Bradley,” the sheriff added, “come on back with us now, son. Brendan and Kate need you right now.”

Bradley nodded his head, gave Valen a confused look, a silent farewell. Something had passed between them, but Bradley didn’t understand it at all. He just knew that he felt safe with

Valen. He felt like he knew him now, even though he really knew nothing about the man. Bradley got in his car after the law men got in theirs, and he drove off towards home; the last place he wanted to go.

Valen put a hand on Raksha's head and breathed a sigh of relief, as he whispered, "That was close."

Mary Rhoads found Sam immediately after school let out that afternoon. "Sam! Did you hear?"

He turned from his locker and regarded her somberly. " 'Bout Bradley's momma? Yeah. That's just awful. I only just met 'im, you know? I really don't know what to do. I went out with him last night, before it happened, and he was already real messed up over Ann." He shook his head. "I don't know why he wanted to confide in me. I don't know why he latched onto me so fast at all, but it makes me feel kinda responsible. Like I gotta watch his back. But I don't know what to say. I never knew nobody whose momma got killed. She was a real nice lady too." He remem-

bered her bandaging him and Ray just two days before, telling him innocently enough about her youthful days ... and Negro Fun Night. He laughed shortly. "Real nice."

Mary put a hand on his shoulder. "Oh, baby. You're such a good friend. I'm sure you'll know what to say, when you see him."

Sam stopped. "Baby?"

She just smiled.

"Girl, you just went out with me once, and we got chased away by a wolf. You sure you wanna call me your baby just now?"

She put a hand on his face and caressed him. "You're the cutest boy in school, Sam. Maybe it's wishful thinking on my part, but I—"

Sam interrupted quickly, "Aw, no! It ain't wishful thinking, Mary! You can call me your baby all you want!" He beamed.

And she squealed.

As Sam continued to get the books he needed out of his locker, Mary recalled how he'd looked bothered when she'd seen him earlier. Intuition told her that something other than Bradley's mother was bothering him. "Sam?"

"Yeah?" He added a moment later, "Baby."

“Is there something else bothering you? I just get this feeling that there is.”

Sam was impressed. “Well, yeah, as a matter of fact ...” He closed his locker, holding only the books he would need to study over the weekend under his right arm. He then offered his left hand to her. She took it, and they walked down the hall. “It’s just that, well, it seems I’m makin’ friends real fast, which is good, especially considering that it didn’t look too good for me when I first got here. But, I guess all this stuff with Valen is getting to me.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like him an’ Ray don’t get along, and I know Valen’s a good guy. I just get this feelin’ about him. And, well, Valen offered me a job last night.”

“What kind of job?”

“Well, that’s the thing. It’s like, watchin’ his house and stuff after school, while he’s away. Mainly ’cause of Ray goin’ by there an’ teasin’ the wolf till it broke through a window and bit him in the ass.”

Mary laughed at that. “Ray’s such a charmer.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Tell me about it. Anyway, I really kind of think I want to do it, but I hadn’t thought about any of the implications till this morning, when my Granny went off about the old days ... again. See, in the old days, my Granny’s own momma was a slave, right here in Nightfire. And guess who owned her.”

Mary was very interested. “Who?”

“A man named Valentinus Alexas, who lived in that very same mansion that his descendant, Valen, lives in now.”

“Oh, my God! That’s so weird!”

“Yeah. I know. So, she’s all tellin’ me that, if I go take care of this man’s house, I’ll be undoing everything that the Civil War was fought for. I’ll be selling our family back into slavery with the Alexases. But I just don’t see it like that. That’s crazy! It’s just a typical high school kid job, ya know? Any white boy would take the job, right?”

She thought about it. “Well, yeah, probably.”

“And there’s a big difference in bein’ a slave and house-sittin’ for a few hours after school every day.”

Mary cautioned him, “But, don’t you think you should at least consider your Granny’s feelings, Sam? Slavery was no small thing, after all. We’re still suffering the aftermath of it all. The racism. The lack of education. I mean, we’re some of the first Black people to go to Nightfire High School. The scars of segregation are still fresh. The old school house we used to have to go to is still standing on the other side of Hill Park. You could get another after-school job that doesn’t involve working in the house your family used to be slaves in.”

“Yeah, but no other job gonna pay me ten dollars an hour.”

“Ten dollars! Wow!”

“Hell, yeah! I know! And, aside from that, I really like Valen. I think he’s cool. But I don’t have to make up my mind right away.” An inspired notion struck Sam then. “Hey, why don’t you come with me to see him tomorrow night? He felt really bad about you having to jump out the window last time. I’m sure he’d love to meet you!”

Mary was reluctant. Maybe it was easy for Sam to get over being chased by a wolf, but for

Mary it was asking a lot. Still, it meant spending time with Sam. “Sure ... I’d love to. You’re sure the wolf is tamed?”

Sam laughed at her fear. “Of course she’s tamed. That’s the coolest animal I’ve ever met! Smart as a whip!”

Mary smiled as Sam opened the door, and the pair walked out into the cool October afternoon.

At 10:30 that night, Bradley closed the door to his brother’s room and faced Ray. Absolute exhaustion covered him like a shadow. “I think he’ll be okay now. I just wonder how many more nights are gonna be like this, before it all seems normal.”

“Time will tell,” Ray said. He shook his head sadly. “I thought Kate would never calm down.”

“Yeah. I don’t know who’s worse off right now, Brendan or Kate.”

“Or Bradley.”

The younger man shrugged Ray’s comment off. “Ah, I’ll be all right. I’ve lost family before.”

“So? I’ve lost friends before. That doesn’t make it easier, you know. Look, anything you need, Bradley ... I’m there.”

“I know, Ray. I really appreciate you staying with us for a while. I just ... can’t do this by myself right now.”

“No problem, Bradley. Hey, she was like a mother to me too. And you’re like a brother. Besides, the hotel was tired of me anyway.” He grinned miserably.

“Yeah ... well, you’re okay on the couch?”

“Sure. No problem. I’ll see you in the morning. I’m cooking. The kids’ll love it.”

“I’m sure. Well ... goodnight.”

“’Night, Bradley.”

With that, the two friends went in opposite directions. Bradley went to his room, and Ray went downstairs to the couch. He took off his shirt, grabbed a blanket, and lay down, thinking, as he did every night. It was good to be out of the hotel, after the mess his uninvited guests had made of it yesterday. He just wasn’t feeling safe there anymore. Not that he felt great here. It was hard to be here, spending the night. So many things were missing. So many people. Ray had

almost collapsed when he'd heard that Mrs. Stevens had been killed ... and that Bradley had gone after Valen Alexas.

Could Valen really be innocent? Ray didn't like to think so. Of course, he had his own reasons not to want *anybody* living in the Alexas Mansion. This was going to complicate things ... but only slightly. It wasn't as though he could've kept things uncomplicated anyway. It was the very nature of his troubles.

A sound interrupted Ray's thoughts. It was a muffled, sobbing sound. He jumped up and went to the stairs, thinking one of the kids had lost it again, until he followed the sound to Bradley's room. He opened the door. "Bradley?"

The younger man looked up, tears flowing. "Ray ... I'm sorry ... I can't seem to cry enough."

Ray closed the door behind him. "Well, shit, Bradley! I'm not blaming you. I'd be crying too." He wanted to laugh at Bradley's pointless apology, but something stopped him. Perhaps just a rare moment of tact.

“Ray ... my whole family is dying off. I’m the oldest one now. I can’t raise Brendan and Kate. I still have to finish raising myself.”

Ray went to the bed, and he sat beside Bradley, putting an arm around him. “Hey, don’t worry. We’re gonna get through this together, man. You’ll see. I’m with you all the way.”

“Ray ... I’m so glad you came back. I love you so much, you know. I really need a big brother right now, and you’re a godsend.”

Ray was quiet. He didn’t know what to say about being a godsend. “I love you too, Bradley. I’m here for you no matter what.” He held Bradley tight, until the younger boy fell asleep on his shoulder. Then, Ray fell asleep himself, wondering how he was going to be any help at all.

The following night, Sam and Mary drove out to the Alexas mansion as planned. Mary was still a little nervous. “Now, you’re *sure* this wolf is tamed.”

Sam laughed. “Yes! It’s tamed. This is gonna be fun. You’ll really like Valen. You’ll see.”

Mary parked her car, and the two of them got out. The lights were on, so Sam went up to the front door and knocked. After a minute, Mary said, "Are you sure he's home?"

Sam conceded, "Well, no, but, I got the impression he spent most of the night at home. We'll just wait another minute." He knocked some more, but there was not even the hint of Raksha in the house.

"So," Mary asked, a bit creeped out by the eerie darkness of the trees and shrubs and land and shadows that surrounded the Alexas mansion, "did you ever talk to Bradley?"

"Yeah, I ran into Ray, and he'd been with Bradley all day. I helped Ray take his stuff from the hotel over to Bradley's house. I spent some time with them, before they had to get the kids to bed. Man, Ray's hotel room was trashed! The owner's gonna be pissed!"

"So, is he moving in for good, or what?"

"No. He's just stayin' till they figure out what they can do about Bradley's situation. Bradley was talkin' about quitting school."

"Oh, that's not good." Mary shook her head.

“I know.” Sam was trying to make anything out through the drawn curtains on the windows. “I’m gonna go around back and see if he’s there. It’s a big house. He might just not hear us. Wait here, in case he comes to the door.”

Mary didn’t like that idea, but she agreed anyway. “Okay. Hurry.”

“I will, baby. I’ll be right back.” He flashed a pearly-white smile and bounded down the stairs. In a moment, he’d disappeared around the corner.

Mary started to get antsy after a minute or so. She thought she heard something in the brush. “Sam?” *If he’s trying to scare me, I’m gonna make him pay.* She left the porch and walked over to her car. She felt safer by the car than on that lonely porch. The car was like a friend in the darkness; something familiar. “Sam, what’s taking so long?”

Mary was about to call louder, but she was prevented. A strong hand grabbed her from behind, covered her mouth. She felt something sharp at her neck, as the voice behind her whispered, “Don’t scream.”

Mary's eyes went wide with terror. This was it. This was the Vampire Killer who'd been in the paper, and tomorrow, she was going to be in the paper too. Mary tried to struggle, but the man was too strong for her. She felt the sharpness turn into a pressure on her tender neck, just as she heard that rustling in the brush getting louder. She turned her eyes, trying to make out what was creating the noise, only to see that devilish wolf leaping towards them. She braced herself for the end. She couldn't fight the man off. She couldn't call for help. The wolf was speeding towards her to tear her throat apart, and the man behind her was going to put a picture of a vampire in her hand when he was done. Tears were streaming down her face, as she begged in silent prayer to God.

And right at that moment, the wolf brushed past her, knocking the man off of her. Mary fell to the ground and felt her throat, where the sharpness had been about to puncture her. She heard a struggle. She turned to look, but she couldn't see anything. The fighting had moved out of range. She heard a man's voice, shouting, cursing. She heard the wolf snarling, jaws

snapping. Then she heard the wolf cry out in pain. She screamed.

“Mary!” Sam came running. “What’s wrong!”

Mary just got up and hugged Sam, pointing to where the sounds of struggle had gone silent.

At that instant, Valen Alexas appeared from the direction Raksha had bounded in from. “Sam! What’s happened? Have you seen Raksha? She ran off a few minutes ago, and I couldn’t get her to come back.”

“No,” Sam said, holding Mary. “And I don’t know what happened.”

“She saved me, Mr. Alexas. The killer had me. He had a knife or something at my throat.”

Sam stood back. “Oh, my God!”

Just then, Raksha hobbled around Mary’s car. Even in the darkness, the blood stood out on her fur, around her mouth, where, she’d bitten the intruder, and on her shoulder, where she’d been stabbed.

Valen was gripped with horror. “Raksha!” He ran to her and kneeled down, putting his hand on the bleeding wound. “Hang in there, girl.”

“Is she gonna be okay?” Sam asked.

“Did she kill him?” asked Mary.

Valen spoke solemnly, “This looks bad, I’m afraid. I don’t know. We need to get her to a vet. Right away. And, no, she didn’t kill him.” He smiled sadly, as he petted his guardian. “Otherwise she’d have brought me his hand to show it.”

“Well let’s go then,” Sam urged. “I’ll drive. Mary’s too shaken up.”

“Fine with me,” Mary allowed.

The four of them loaded into Mary’s car, Sam at the wheel, Valen in the passenger seat, and Mary and Raksha in the back. Mary remembered feeling that she couldn’t forgive Raksha, at one point, for frightening her. Now she hugged her with tremendous force, not wanting to let go of the beast who’d saved her life.

Valen was angry. The Vampire Killer had been something he could have done without in Nightfire, but now it had gotten personal. A line had been crossed. Valen promised himself, silently, that if Raksha bled to death, he would see to it that this mass murderer died in prolonged agony. He muttered through clenched teeth, “I’ve had more than enough of this mass murderer.”

Ray didn't know what possessed him to go to church the following morning. Surely it wasn't God. He knew better than to believe in God. Maybe it was the people. The fellowshiping. He'd been with the Stevenses for two nights in a row, and he'd needed to get out of that house. It was too sad a place. He'd tried to get Bradley to come with him, but there was just no talking him into it.

Ray was very worried about Bradley. The younger man was clearly being swallowed up by a very bleak depression. Ray hoped it would pass, though he knew there was still so much to do before it could. The funeral had to be over and done with first. A plan for how the Stevens kids would survive had to be in place. In a way, Ray was grateful for something this epic to occupy his mind. At the same time, however, it was like a nightmare, and he couldn't wake up.

Ray heard not a word of Reverend Michaels' sermon. He was lost in his thoughts, and he was also scoping people out, picking familiar faces out

of the crowd from when he and Donny had been in the church youth group. He saw Doris Gardner, and that led his eyes to the Preston sisters, Mati and Helen. What a trio they were, all dressed up in their Sunday best.

Helen Preston let out a gasp. *Oh my God! He's looking at me ... and smiling!* Ray Don, the most beautiful man alive, had just smiled at her.

Doris and Mati both looked at Helen in unison. Helen turned and saw them staring. "What? Shit!"

Mati laughed harder than she would have liked to at this. "Shhh! Helen, we're in church." A fact of church was, things were always funnier, when you weren't supposed to be laughing; like while the preacher was wrapping up his sermon.

Helen started to laugh at her sister's laughing, but she didn't lose control. "Why were y'all staring at me?"

Doris told her teasingly, "Because, you have a thing for Ray. Because you wanna suck ... his ... dick."

Mati hid her face in a hymnal, laughing like a fool. She managed to wheeze, “Doris! Shut up! Church!”

Doris laughed wickedly, noting that Helen had turned bright, glowing red. “Mm-hm. Somebody’s got a crush.” She found it in her heart to sympathize. “Not that I blame you, Helen. He is *hot!*” She leaned over and whispered loudly in Helen’s ear, “I wouldn’t mind slurpin’ some myself.” At this point, convulsing with forbidden laughter, Mati got up and went to the bathroom.

Doris was very pleased with herself. “So, how long?”

Helen wasn’t sure what Doris was asking. “How *long?*”

Doris slapped her shoulder playfully. “How long have you wanted his cock, you hornball?”

“Doris, it’s not like that. I ... *really* like him. Not just his body. He’s just ... always been my ideal man. Since I was a little girl.”

Doris cackled. “Now you’ve got these hormones to contend with, and they will *murder* you, bitch! You want me to ask him for you?”

People were starting to turn around and glare at Doris, but Helen didn't care. They glared at Doris almost *every* Sunday. This time, though, Helen was getting things off her chest. Important things. And Doris was understanding her. "Ask him what?"

"If he'll show it to you."

"Doris! No!"

"Oh, c'mon, Helen. You've gotta lose it sometime."

Helen giggled. "Doris! You're the Devil! I don't want to just get it on with Ray. I want to have a *relationship* with him. I'm serious. He's my dream guy."

"Oh, God! You are so retarded." Doris sat up straight and nodded. "I'll ask him for you."

"Whatever, Doris."

Mati made her way back to the pew. Doris looked at her with a smirk, and she started laughing again. Off to the bathroom.

The sermon ended, and people began filing out through the doors, where Reverend Michaels was shaking each of their hands in turn. Ann made

her way through the small crowd to Ray, who she'd spotted earlier. "Ray!"

Ray turned, surprised to see the lately elusive Annabelle Maryweather. "Ann. Nice of you to show up somewhere. Bradley's been trying to call you. I know he stopped, but, well, his mom died and all." Ray had decided not to like Ann. He knew she didn't care about Bradley.

"Yeah, I know. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh yeah?"

"I was hoping you could tell him for me ... not to call me anymore. Just tell him I'm not interested. I just ... can't have a clingy boyfriend right now."

"Clingy?" Ray was pissed off. "Look you two-dollar hussy, if you wanna break Bradley's heart even more than it already is, do it yourself! I'm not your god damned messenger boy. It's not my fault you're a sniveling, cowardly psychotic. Bradley's the best thing you ever had. And breaking up with him, through your mother I might add, was the best gift you ever gave him."

Ann was in tears, and she ran out through the doors. Everyone was staring at Ray. He

shrugged. “Well ... it’s true.” To Ray’s surprise, several of the spectators chimed in supporting his impromptu sermon to Ann.

“Was that Ann?” Doris asked Helen. “Where’s she been?”

“See?” Helen said to Doris. “He’s wonderful. He stands up for his friends without even blinking. He’s so ... charming!”

Doris rolled her eyes. “Oh, that’s it. I’ll go ask him for you.” Doris started marching towards Ray.

“Doris no!” Helen ran and hid behind a group of chatty old people. She watched.

“Hey, Ray!” Doris shouted, as she approached him.

Ray smiled. “Doris. How’s life?”

“Pretty good, gorgeous. How’d you get here this morning?”

“I borrowed Bradley’s car.”

“Ooh, you have wheels! I rode with Mati and *Helen*. Wanna give me a ride home then?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

“*Helen*, by the way, would love to know what kind of underwear you wear.”

“Doris,” he said, “you’re so weird.”

She linked arms with him and walked him out the door, saying, “I’m liberated, Ray! That’s why we make such a great team. If we sat together in church, I’m *sure* that lightning would strike till there was no building left at all. And I’d be laughing in Hell.”

Ray laughed as they walked away.

Helen stared, mortified, watching them leave together, arm in arm.

Valen Alexas approached the Stevens house apprehensively. He was so used to having Raksha with him that traveling without her made him nervous. He knocked on the door.

Bradley opened it. “Valen! Hi. I heard about what happened out at your place last night.”

Valen showed his anger. “Yes, we had the police out ... looking for clues. Of course, they found nothing. And my wolf is homebound until she heals. I’m just glad we got her to the vet in time. I get so attached to pets.”

“So what brings you by?”

Valen smirked. “Well, I was restless mainly. Just walking. I wanted to see how you were doing since two nights ago. I was concerned for you.”

“I’m all right. I mean ... I’m getting by. The funeral’s tomorrow.”

“I hear Ray’s staying with you.”

“Yeah. He stepped out though. This morning, he had to go to church. Tonight, he had to get out.”

“Why didn’t you go with him?”

Bradley looked away. “I don’t know. I’m ... just not up to it.”

“I understand. Bradley, I really just wanted to tell you again that I’ll help you in any way I can. I want to help you, with the funeral expenses, if you’ll let me. I think of you as a kindred spirit. We both are orphans.”

Bradley was surprised and relieved all at once. “I ... yes! I mean, I don’t really have a choice. Thank you.”

Valen seemed satisfied. “Good. Well, I really must get back to Raksha. I don’t like leaving her.”

“Okay, well, stop by sometime when she’s feeling better. Stay a while.”

Valen smiled. "I'll do that, Bradley. Thank you." As Valen walked away, he felt warm inside. He was developing friends after all.

Ray sat at the bar at Dan Parker's. He was drinking nothing harder than a Dr. Pepper. His drink of choice. Once again, he'd just needed to get some fresh air. He heard a familiar voice behind him. "Hey, stranger."

Ray turned to see Doris. He smiled. "Long time, no see. What brings you by?"

"Nothing much. Just bored." She sat down beside him. "You know, Bradley's *ex*-girlfriend is a real psycho. I just called her and tried to talk to her about this morning, but she went crazy. She did the same shit to Jeffrey Mason a while back."

Ray was interested. "Really? What shit is that?"

"You know, she shagged him and dropped him basically. She's just weird. Now, she won't even talk to him if she has to say more than two words. The difference is, she actually had a wholesome relationship with Bradley for a while first. I don't get it. If I could have Bradley once,

I'd have to have him more than once." She laughed. "She said some weird thing about moving to Boston."

Ray looked at her, confused. "Boston? What's in Boston?"

Doris rolled her eyes. "Who knows? She's crazy. Maybe she has some magical better friends who understand her mental abnormality there. It could be anything. I don't know. I stopped listening when she stopped making sense."

Ray hated Ann. "Do me a favor, Doris. Don't tell Bradley any of this. He *loved* Ann. Not that she deserved him. He doesn't need this shit right now. I should kill her for trying to make things worse this morning. God. I just can't believe her."

"I'll keep quiet, Ray." She smiled wickedly, which was her favorite way to smile. "Buy me a drink?"

Ray shrugged. "Sure."

Valen Alexas walked through the front door of his house. "Raksha! I'm home!" He turned on the

living room lights. There was not a peep from his faithful wolf. “Raksha?”

He went to the kitchen and saw her lying on the floor, not responding to his calls. His heart skipped a beat. He rushed again to her side. Her bandages were in place, covering her stitches, so she wouldn’t chew them off. He felt her throat. She was breathing. “Drugged,” he whispered. He knew at that moment he was not alone in the house. The mass murderer had come back for his revenge. But why hadn’t he killed Raksha?

Suddenly, something clicked into place as he thought. The killer could have gone for Raksha’s throat the night before, but he didn’t. He had no intention of killing her. There was wolf hair at the scene of every murder. It was so obvious that Valen didn’t know how he’d missed it until now. He stood. “I know you’re in here. Stop hiding.”

Then, from behind, a hand grabbed his mouth, and he felt something sharp at his throat, and a voice softly whispered, “Don’t—”

But Valen had no patience for this, and he was much stronger than the killer. He did a quick martial arts maneuver that he’d learned from his friend Julius, allowing him to escape from the

killer's grip and flip the man over his shoulder, tossing him to the wall. Valen then fell on the man, grabbed his arm in a fury, and pulled the shoulder out of socket. He then twisted one of the killer's legs, until he heard it pop.

The killer screamed in agony. "Why don't you just kill me!"

Valen stood back and smiled. "Oh, I will. I just want to hurt you first. I want you to realize just how stupid you are." He looked at the man, who wore the skin of a red wolf over his head and along his back. The weapon he'd used was made of wolf teeth. He recognized this one as low ranking.

He went on. "I figured it out, when I knew that you wouldn't kill Raksha. Not the noble wolf. A werewolf acolyte only kills one wolf, to drink its blood and make a cloak, for initiation. I am here, because werewolves can't stand the stench of their own dead; which is why a vial of werewolf blood is kept in the basement of a local structure—to keep your masters out. Ah, but they can send an acolyte. A stupid acolyte. I'm going to send them one of your hands."

The man looked terrified. “Let me go. I’ll tell them I killed you.”

“I don’t think so. I’m afraid you killed too many people attempting to frame me. You idiot. I’m going to kill you and place your body somewhere that won’t implicate me at all. There’s a great underground tunnel system here, and it’s completely at my disposal. You see, when we founded Nightfire as a feeding ground in 1847, we knew we’d need a tunnel system to get around and hide ourselves and the bodies of our prey, so that no one would suspect us. Let you go? After all that you’ve done here? After you dared wound Raksha? After you murdered that poor boy’s mother? After you tried to expose my presence? No. Never. You just picked the wrong vampire to mess with.”

The man cried out, begged for mercy.

Valentinus would hear none of it, as he silently went to work.

Next: “The Ghost of Alexas Mansion”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of eleven books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on further chapters in *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*.

www.GlennSladeClarkJr.com