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The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

The Chronicles of
Nightfire,
Texas

Books by Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas

CHAPTER 2

THE MYSTERIOUS VALEN ALEXAS

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas #2
“The Mysterious Valen Alexas”

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CHAPTER 2

THE MYSTERIOUS VALEN ALEXAS

Sam heard the sound of the monster's moist jaws snapping open, and he prepared for the end. But there came a sudden and chilling interruption. "Raksha! Come."

The pressure left Sam's back, as the demon took its leave of him. The fierce jaws that Sam had imagined never tore into his flesh. Yet Sam felt no relief. There was someone else in the house; someone commanding this monster; this monster who would have torn him apart, just as Janie Alberts had been torn apart at the throat by some mysterious murderer. Sam could only imagine that the monster had been called away by someone so much fiercer. He kept his eyes shut, hoping the pair would leave him; hoping that

they would ignore him till sunrise; for surely such terrible things could not endure the light of day.

The lights came on, flooding the room and assaulting Sam's clenched eyes. He opened them.

"Please, forgive Raksha. She was just doing her job, and she has her ways. You're safe now, though. I won't let her harm you." The voice fell to gentle laughter. "It's all right, sir. You can look at me. I won't bite."

Sam slowly rose from the floor. He sat up, shaking, and he turned to face this voice. To his total astonishment, the voice was not produced by some monster. The man looked not to be threatening in the least; and the demon, as the light now revealed, was actually a wolf. A wolf that looked friendly and content, as she panted at her master's side. "You gonna kill me?"

The man laughed soothingly. "No."

"They told me this place was deserted."

"It was." The man smiled, then he looked at Sam's soiled clothes. "Hm. I like the way you dress. I apologize for the mess that Raksha made of you. Please won't you stand?"

Samuel did, slowly, and his eyes shifted quickly from side to side, looking for an escape.

“Ah, yes! You look to be about my size. I think you’ll be fond of my wardrobe. Most of my better clothes haven’t been sent yet, but my suitcase is full of beautiful things. Not quite like the garments you’re wearing now, but still quite fine. I can’t have you leaving such a mess.”

The boy looked confused. “This is your house?”

“Yes. I’m Valen Alexas. This house has been in my family for years, but I have lived abroad. Let’s go upstairs now and get you some clothes to wear. And perhaps you can explain to me why you have broken into my house.”

It was afternoon at last, though it seemed as though a week had passed since morning to Sheriff William Cody. The sheriff was a strong man, and he was very much a man of the people. He had come to know and love practically every family in town; all races. He was very passionate about true justice. In his mind, true justice and prejudice of any kind could not exist in the same time or place.

Still, Sheriff Cody was no saint. He was one of Nightfire's Good Ol' Boys first and foremost. He loved to talk and "shoot the shit" with any man who'd listen. He tried to watch his mouth around women. He didn't think they would appreciate all of the things he liked to say about this person or that. It wasn't that he thought they were less intelligent; rather, he thought that they were more high class than himself, and his own wife Angelina was the finest of them all. She could be a crazy lunatic at times, but she was a fine woman just the same. It was one of her lunatic ideas, in fact, that had brought Sheriff Cody here today, after a second murdered body had been found.

The door to the little, silver trailer home opened, and the fifty-two-year-old woman who stood behind it greeted the sheriff with a decidedly predatory grin. "Sheriff Cody. I've been expecting you."

The sheriff huffed. "Am I supposed to be impressed by your eerie psychic powers now?"

"Ha. No. Angelina called me. She told me you might be difficult. Please," she gestured with her arm, "come inside."

The boys on the force better not find out about this. Me with Mary the Witch, after all my bluster. The sheriff entered Mary Jean Donovan's little home, and she seated him at a round table with a red cloth covering it.

"So what? Are you gonna tell my fortune?"

She shrugged, as she sat down opposite him. "If that's what you really want. However, I do not think that it is." She looked into his soothing, gray eyes. "You are in pain. You are in fear."

"Damn it! How much did Angelina tell you?"

"She told me that you were coming; that you might be difficult. But then you knocked on the door, and I had to let her go. You're uncomfortable with this. With me. Sheriff Gilespe often—"

"I know! But I'm not him. I never liked it that he came to you like he did. That he seemed to rely on you. All your supposed psychic power wasn't enough in the end, after all. He's still been locked up in the bug house, and they've thrown away the key! I don't want to end up like that. I won't!" He sighed. "I don't give you any credit. I think you're either a fraud or a crack pot. I'm only here because Angelina insisted that you could help me; that you could point me in the

right direction. So I thought I'd give you a chance." He leaned in. "However, if you're *too* accurate, I'll have to be suspicious of it. I don't fall for all that psychic shit the way my wife does."

Mary Jean smiled. "Of course. You're a practical man. I can see that. You won't end up like your predecessor. No. You will do well for yourself. But you have other concerns. Something that you are afraid of. Something that is assaulting you. Please, talk to me. If you will not accept me as a psychic, at least accept me as a counselor. I have never left anyone unsatisfied. If I were never on target, the townspeople wouldn't talk about me as they do. They wouldn't come to me again and again. They wouldn't call me Mary the Witch."

The sheriff thought it over. What did he have to lose? He could not remember anything like this ever happening in Nightfire, and he was at a loss as to how he should find the murderer. He was unsure where to start. "Well, okay. There's been two murders in the past two days. Well ... nights. We just never find 'em till morning. Yesterday, we found Janie Alberts. Today it

was a young Negro boy. A stranger. I never seen 'im before. We're still tryin' to figure out who he is; where he came from. I don't know. But it don't matter fer shit that I don't know him. That's two murders. Two murders that happened right under my nose. Grisly murders. And I don't have any suspects. That's where my wife was tellin' me you'd be of some help."

"Yes." Mary Jean seemed strangely distant. She seemed to be looking at things that weren't there. "There is a monster in Nightfire. A terrible person. A man."

"That's no big insight. How many female mass murderers you ever heard of?"

"Point taken, Sheriff. I will try to see some more. Hm. I learned something the other night. There were omens. A vampire has taken residence in Nightfire. But it is not this vampire for whom you should be looking."

The sheriff appeared stunned. He was. The body had been found that morning at the Johnson Ranch by Tom Johnson himself. Sheriff Cody knew that the details of the first murder had already spread across town, but the details of this one had been kept more or less under wraps.

For one, the victim was someone that no one knew; and second, Tom Johnson knew how to keep his mouth shut. Few people would even know that there had been a second murder until the paper came out the next day. The vampire connection: that's what had frightened Sheriff Cody. "Why do you say that?"

"Why does it matter that I have said this? I am telling you that finding the vampire is not your biggest problem."

"My white ass it ain't! Both bodies were found in a similar state. They were torn apart at the throat. And there was a picture in their hands. It was some damned TV vampire in Janie's, and the Negro boy had a picture of Bella Lugosi. Count Dracula himself! There is some sick bastard out there wantin' us to believe in vampires. Now I'm just itchin' to know how the hell you know about it!"

"It is my gift. I know that you don't suspect me of anything in this case. You know deep down that I have had nothing to do with it. You have a great instinct about people. Almost a sixth sense. You are gifted in your field."

The sheriff wanted to argue, but he could not. He just didn't believe that Mary Jean could be involved in the murders. He felt it in his gut. Maybe she was a good guesser. Maybe someone had managed to tip her off. Maybe Angelina had said more than the witch was letting on. "All right," he conceded. "Maybe you're right about that, Mary Jean. But just the same, why don't you go ahead and tell me everything you know."

Mary Jean offered him a smug and toothy grin. "Very well, Sheriff Cody. Let me tell you the rest. There was wolf's hair on the wind."

The sheriff's heart skipped a beat. "We found wolf's hair at the scene of the crime this morning. Then I sent some boys out to Janie's place, and they found it there as well. You have my attention, Mary Jean."

She nodded. "This is a clever fiend, but not *so* clever. He is clever in his stealth alone. Otherwise, he is a clumsy fool. He is a stranger here. He is a pawn. You will not find him if you look for this vampire." She closed her eyes and seemed to strain. "The vampire is going to win." She opened her eyes and looked to the sheriff

solemnly. “And there is absolutely nothing that you can do to stop it.”

Ray Don was sitting on the side of his bed in the dim light of his hotel room. His mind was in chaos. The Gideons Bible on the nightstand seemed to be taunting him, laughing at him. He wanted to tear it to shreds and throw whatever remained out into the street to be run over again and again by the passing traffic. He needed a diversion. He needed a way to get the evil book off of his mind. He focused on the little torn off corner of notebook paper just beside the Bible. Ray didn't know what to do. He wanted comfort in the worst way, but he was having a difficult time trying to differentiate between right and wrong. He didn't believe in God, and this was a relatively new development. It was now Ray's word that determined right and wrong, and every moral dilemma seemed to be too much.

Late that morning, Doris Gardner had come by. Ray, having slept in, had crawled out of bed and answered the door in nothing but his boxer shorts. Doris had not been the slightest bit

embarrassed by this. She had smiled mischievously and walked right in. By the way she had flirted and the continuous stream of sexual innuendoes, Ray had known what she had wanted from him easily. The problem was that he wasn't sure it was right. He really didn't know her that well anymore. Not the woman she'd become. It was hard for Ray to think of Doris Gardner as anything but a fourteen-year-old, giggling child. Ray had clumsily explained to Doris that he was very tired, and that he would probably see her later on, but he needed to sleep.

Not in the least bit discouraged, Dori had written her number on the corner of a sheet of notebook paper and torn it off for him, so that he could call her when he had more energy.

What's my problem? he thought to himself now, as he reached over and brought the paper closer to his eyes. *If there is no God, then all things are permitted. But does that make them right?* Ray wanted to cry. He was so confused, just as he had been ever since he and Lee had stumbled upon that—

There was a knock at the door. "Come in!" Ray decided that it didn't matter to him who

walked in at all. He needed a distraction, and he needed it now.

“Hey, Ray!” came the more than welcome voice of Bradley Stevens. He started to laugh. “Guess what happened to Sam!” The teenager laughed some more. “He has got the dumbest luck!”

Ray smiled, so relieved by the interruption, and he saw Sam walk in behind Bradley and close the door behind him. “What happened?”

“Tell him!” Bradley said to Sam.

“Well—”

“Gosh, Ray!” Bradley interrupted the other teenager. “Do you not believe in light?” He flicked a switch on the wall and activated the ceiling lamp, illuminating the entire room.

Ray squinted against the brightness. “That’s the real question, isn’t it?”

“Go on!” Bradley said. “Tell him.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “It’s not that big a deal, really. Bradley just thinks it’s too funny—”

“He got busted at the old Alexas mansion last night!” Bradley blurted out.

“Busted?” Ray asked. “Who the hell would care whether or not you were trespassing at that creepy, old place?”

Sam gave Ray an amused look. “The owner.”

“The owner? You mean somebody lives there?”

“Yeah. He said the mansion’d been in his family for years, but he been gone for a while. Now he back.”

“From where?” Ray asked. “Who is this guy? That mansion’s been abandoned since before I was born! Way before I was born!”

“Said his name was Valen. He was actually pretty nice. He let me clean up and give me some new clothes after his pet wolf scared the piss out of me.”

“Pet wolf?” Ray was getting excited. There were strange things afoot. Distracting things. “Didn’t they say that Janie Alberts looked like she’d been attacked by a wild animal? Did this guy just get into town?”

Sam seemed hesitant to answer. “Yes, and yes. He just got in yesterday morning at about two A.M. But you ain’t thinkin’ that—?”

“Why not?” Ray asked, as he stood excitedly. “He got here just in time to let his wolf rip Janie apart. Then, maybe he put that picture in her hand, because he’s a sick fuck who wants everyone to think some vampire did it! It makes perfect sense!”

“Yeah, but ain’t that about the same time you got here too?”

Ray shrugged. “Well, yeah. But I don’t have any wild animals to help me tear people’s throats out. Let’s go!”

Bradley was lost. “Go where?”

“The Alexas mansion! We’ll pay our new neighbor a visit. Ask ’im if he’s killed any old ladies lately.”

“You serious?” Sam asked. “Man, he ain’t that bad! It has to be some sort of coincidence. He was a real cool guy.”

“Yeah, yeah. That don’t mean shit.” Ray said, as he threw on his shoes and headed for the door. “You’re driving, Bradley.”

“Of course I am. I’m the only one who has a car.”

The two teenagers just looked at Ray as though he had lost his mind.

“Come on,” Ray said with a grin. “It’ll be fun.”

“Fun?” Bradley asked. “What if this guy *is* the ‘Vampire Killer,’ as christened by the *Nightfire Chronicle*? How much fun are we gonna have then?”

“Lighten up, Stevens.” Ray shrugged and then laughed. “If this guy is the Vampire Killer, then he’ll probably be sleeping anyway. Right? Right. So let’s go.”

Ray headed out the door, and his two young friends followed helplessly. Bradley remembered the words of Rubin Santana the day before on the matter of Ray returning to Nightfire. *“You best keep him out of trouble. If it can be done.”* Bradley considered that. *No*, he concluded, *I don’t suppose that anyone can keep Ray out of trouble. That would be just about as futile as cramming God into a jelly jar.*

The trio arrived at the old Alexas mansion in little time. Ray bolted out of the back seat as soon as Sam pulled the front seat forward, and he walked quickly to the front door. Sam and Bradley followed. “Where is this guy’s car?” Ray asked.

“He don’t have no car.” Sam answered. “He ain’t got all his stuff here yet.”

“Interesting,” Ray said.

Bradley stepped up onto the great front porch of the mansion. He studied it. As he looked around, he spoke quietly, “Well, if I were a vampire, this is where I’d stay. It’s the perfect place. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever even seen this house in the light of day until now. And you can’t even see any other houses from here. Just trees and grass, and dirt road. Very isolated.”

“No shit.” Ray said. “It’s also the perfect place for a mass murderer and his evil pet wolf.”

“Raksha ain’t evil, man. She jus’—” Sam stopped cold. He heard that familiar, low growl. “Oh, shit.”

“Where is that coming from?” Ray looked around. “I’m knocking.”

As Ray knocked on the door, Sam and Bradley both backed away slowly, as though the door were going to explode. Sam was embarrassed that Ray would be so out to get the man who had treated him so well the night before. Bradley was just scared. He had no desire whatsoever to meet a sadistic mass murderer face to face.

Ray's knocking was answered by a ferocious snarling. Ray backed away from the door, and the wolf appeared at the window, all teeth and drool. It was a horrifying image to behold. All three men gasped and backed farther away. Bradley and Sam backed completely off of the porch.

The wolf continued to growl threateningly.

"Ain't nobody home, Ray! Don't fuck with the guard dog, man!" Sam warned.

"Let's just give him a minute. It's a big house. Maybe it takes him a while to crawl out of his coffin in broad daylight." Ray smirked at the wolf in the window, and he marched back up to the door. He started to bang on it with his fist, as he shouted, "Hey, Dracula! Wake the fuck up!"

The wolf began to go ballistic.

Bradley didn't want to hang around and wait for the man to open the door, especially after Ray's taunting comments. "Come on, Ray. He's obviously not home, and you're gonna give that animal a stroke."

"Yeah," Ray agreed. "I guess you're right. We'll come back later then. I have to go down to the employment office anyway." Ray looked at the wolf as he began to walk away. He made an

angry, toothy face and growled mockingly at the snarling beast. He then laughed and turned away. “Okay, let’s go.”

Just then, Ray heard the sound of glass shattering behind him, and Bradley and Sam’s eyes went wide with horror as they turned and bolted to the car. Ray turned around to see the wolf on the porch, shaking the glass of the window from its fur. “Oh, shit.”

Ray leapt from the porch and tried to run to the car, but the wolf was on top of him in no time, tearing at his pants with its deadly jaws, growling at Ray with immeasurable rage.

“Oh, fuck! It’s gonna eat him!” Bradley didn’t know what to do.

Sam considered the previous day, when Ray had come between him and Herman Santana. Sam could not turn from the opportunity to repay the debt. He may have been scrawny, but he was no coward.

The monster latched on to Ray’s back pocket, as the young man tried to crawl to the car. “Guys. I’m in a bit of distress here.” Ray could not stop thinking that the wolf would lose its grip

at any moment and try to get a meatier hold on him.

“Raksha,” Sam said. The wolf stopped growling and regarded him. Shakily, Sam eased over to the wolf and knelt down beside it. He reached out. “It’s okay, girl.” And he patted the creature gently on the head. “Ray’s with me. Please let him go. He’s just an ass hole. He don’t know when to stop playing.”

The beast huffed. Then it grudgingly released its prey and began to lick Sam’s hands.

Sam laughed. “You better get in the car now, Ray.”

“Right. Thanks.” Ray wasted no time. When he was safely in the car, along with Bradley, Samuel patted the wolf again on the head and joined them. The three drove off and breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Well,” Ray ventured, “I’d say we now have candidate number one. This Valen Alexas and his evil pet wolf. How the hell did you do that, Sam?”

“I don’t know. I just took a chance. She and I were on good terms last night, after Valen introduced us. And she seems really, really smart.

Unnaturally smart. I just thought that maybe I could vouch for you.”

“Good thing it worked, or we’d both be dog food.”

“Hoo! Thank God.” Sam was letting the stress of the moment catch up with him, and he was shaking uncontrollably. “Me and Mary are definitely not going to let Bradley recommend any great date spots in the future. That’s for sure.”

“Hey,” Bradley spoke from the driver’s side. “How was I supposed to know that some guy and a man eating wolf had just moved in?”

“Well how was your date, Bradley?” Ray asked.

Bradley hesitated, but he couldn’t help but smile stupidly. “Oh, it was okay. You know. We had a good time.”

“What did y’all do?”

“Uh ... nothing. You know. We ... uh... talked ... and ... uh ... stuff.”

“Gee ... uh ... Bradley,” Ray said mockingly. “Uh ... I don’t suppose you could be ... uh ... leaving anything out.”

Bradley laughed. “Shut up, Ray. We had a good time. But I didn’t see her today. She wasn’t in school. I’ve gotta call her when I get home, but first I need to get Kate a present for her birthday party today.”

“Yeah, you better call her,” Ray scolded. “Especially after ... uh ...”

Sam and Ray both laughed at Bradley, and Bradley turned bright red, still unable to repress his goofy smile.

Early that evening, Ray crept into the offices of the *Nightfire Chronicle*, the newspaper that had been servicing Nightfire, Texas since the town’s founding in 1847. Ray found his way to the chief editor’s office. Thomas Johnson was seated at his desk, smoking a pipe and reading over something on blue paper.

“Hey, Old Tom. What’cha know?”

The man looked up from his paper and put it on the desk, astonished. “Ray!” He stood up, not believing his eyes. “I’d heard rumors, but I swear I didn’t believe them.” He went over to the young man and hugged him fiercely. He then

stepped back and looked the young man over. “You cut your hair, and you got taller. You look good, kid. A sight for sore eyes. Why didn’t you come sooner?”

Ray shrugged. “I thought you would be pissed at me for what I did.”

“What? You mean that whole draft-dodging thing?”

“Well, yeah. You told me that you didn’t agree. You said I should have gone.”

“Ray, don’t you know me better than that? I didn’t agree, and you heard me out. Then you did what you damn well pleased. You did what you damn well thought was right. I respected you for that. Even before I changed my mind. No matter, son. It’s all in the past. And the past grows ever more distant.”

Ray was surprised. “You changed your mind?”

“Well yeah! That’s my prerogative ain’t it?”

“Why?”

“Well, Ray, I could only help to bury so many kids who died for nothing. You know. We didn’t have any business bein’ over there. You said so yourself. And you were right. But I was

never cross at you for leaving, even before. You can ask anyone. I would light a candle for you at Saint Paul every week. I loved you. You were like the son I never had.”

Ray started to cry, and he covered his eyes in embarrassment.

“Hey, now. Don’t fight that. What’re they for?”

Ray removed his hand and let his tears show. “For relief, for regret, for guilt at my lack of regret, for ... thankfulness. I’m so happy that I still have you, Tom.”

“Ray, you’ll have me as long as I breathe. I’m so glad you’re back. How long are you staying?”

Ray laughed, as his tears began to fade. “Two years. Maybe longer. Depends on how things go. But even if I leave in two years, I’ve got the freedom to come back now whenever I want.”

“Good. So where are you workin’?”

Ray rolled his eyes. “Oh, God! There’s a tale. I went down to the employment office today, and I told ’em my situation. Turns out the old bat at the desk hates draft-dodgers. Her

nephew was killed in the conflict. I told her it wasn't my fault, because she seemed to be blaming me. Then I told her that if he had done like me he wouldn't have died for the damned stupid government. So then she just glares at me, and I'm like, great, Ray, you've done it again. Then she asks me what kind of public service work I was looking for. I told her just anything, as long as I don't have to work with kids, old people, or retards."

Tom started to chuckle heartily.

"You see where this is going, don't you? You know her, right?"

"Ray, I know everybody in Nightfire. And Gretta goes to my church. She and that very special son of hers never miss a service."

"I don't know how I do it, Tom. I just have a gift for pissing people off. So she tells me about her son and all his problems with Down syndrome and how wonderful children are in general, and I'm like, yeah, yeah, so just find me some nice job painting signs or something. Then she looks through her books and says, 'Well, Mr. Don. It appears that the only opening we have is at the recreation center, working with children

and young teens.’ And I’m like, well, why don’t you look a little bit harder, lady, and she’s all, ‘You can start Monday, Mr. Don. Or perhaps you’d prefer it in jail.’ So I took the job, and she’s all smug. I know she just did it to spite me. I don’t wanna work with kids. They’re just so ... slimy.”

Tom chuckled some more. “Ray, you haven’t changed a bit. You’re still an ass. I think Gretta probably did you a great favor. Come 1976, you’ll be bawling your eyes out if you have to leave those kids.”

“Bull shit.”

“Correct me if I ’m wrong now, son, but, didn’t you almost burn that rec center down when you were eight?”

Ray rolled his eyes again at the revelation he feared Tom was getting to. “Yes, I did, but it was an accident! I was just a kid! Tell me Old Man Morris isn’t still alive and—”

Tom was loving it. “Oh yes, he’s alive and well. Still running the rec center. Still talks about you when he gets drunk. You’re in for quite a ride come Monday morning, boy. Oh, yes! He remembers you well.”

“Great. I don’t suppose I can still just go to jail. It might be easier.”

“Oh, stop whining, Ray. You’ll do okay. You always do. It’s only two years. Then you can come and work for me, if you want; here, or at the ranch, or do whatever you want, man. Your debts will be paid. You’ll be free again.”

“Ah, whatever. I’m sure you’re right. I’ll deal with it. Assuming the kids don’t piss and shit me to death. So how’s Abi?”

“She’s fine. Still teaches Sunday school every week. You should come by tonight. Hell, let’s go right now. I’ll put somethin’ on the grill. Abi’ll be thrilled to see you!”

Ray smiled. “All right, Tom. That sounds like just the medicine. It’s so good to be home.”

“Yes,” Tom nodded. “It’s good to have you home, Ray. Just try not to get into too much trouble over the next two years. Okay?”

Ray looked demoralized. “Who? Me?”

Thomas Johnson only laughed, and the pair walked out together.

Bradley got home at just after five. He entered as quietly as he could, carrying the little, brightly-wrapped package under his arm. His mother startled him by suddenly appearing in the entryway. She whispered, "Bradley, where have you been?"

"Sorry, Mom. I couldn't find Sweet Sixteen Barbie anywhere. I looked all over."

"Oh, no! What did you get instead?"

"The lady at the store said that Sun Valley Barbie was the next best thing, and she had one left. So I got her that. Do you think she'll like it?"

"Oh, I'm sure she will. When you take off Barbie's clothes, they all look alike anyway."

Bradley's nine-year-old brother Brendan came into view then, fully dolled up with lipstick and rouge. "Look, Momma. I'm a girl!"

"Oh! Brendan! Go wash up right now! You're going to attract the wrong kind of attention."

"It was Kate's idea!"

"Brendan, go on now!"

“Fine!” The young boy stomped off in disappointment.

Audri whispered pleadingly to her older son, “Boys’ night out!”

Bradley rolled his eyes and nodded his head. “Tomorrow, Mom. I promise.”

“Bradley!” Little Katelynn Michelle ran into the dark entryway and wrapped herself around her big brother’s leg.

He patted her head. “Happy birthday, Grover .”

She backed away and put her hands on her hips. “I’m not Grover today! I’m Kate, because it’s my birthday. Mom says that I only get presents if I don’t talk like anything off *Sesame Street*.”

“Tell you what. You get one from me anyway.”

“See, Mom! I told you God was on my side!”

Mrs. Stevens put a hand to her head in exasperation. “Oh, Kate, go on back to your guests. Now that your brother’s here, it’s time for cake.”

“Yes!” She made a triumphant gesture with her fist.

“Here you go, Stink.” Bradley handed her the package. “But don’t open it until after you blow out the candles.”

“Okay!” She snatched it from his hands. “Let’s go!” She ran off back to the party and shouted, “Happy birthday to me! Now! Start singing!” A moment of silence passed. “Sing it now, Goddamnit!”

“I’ll go get the matches, dear.” Mrs. Stevens looked as though she were about to break down. “I don’t want to scold her at her own birthday party, Bradley. I don’t know where she picks it up! She can be so ... strong willed! Please say something to her nicely. She looks up to you. I don’t want the other girls’ mother’s to think we have a broken home. I don’t want them to think she learns her bad language from me! I just ... birthdays can be so hard for me.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I’ll get her to stop.”

“Thank you, Bradley.”

From the other room, they heard four-year-old Eleanor Jones from next door giggling loudly before shouting, “Goddamnit!”

Mrs. Stevens gasped.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll take care of it.”

Moments later, Audri had lighted the seven candles on her daughter's pink birthday cake, and she invited the ten little girls and Bradley and Brendan to start singing.

In the voice of Grover from *Sesame Street*, Kate ordered everyone to sing louder.

When "The Birthday Song" was over, Audri Stevens scolded her younger children. "Kate, I told you not to talk like a monster today!"

"But Bradley said I could as long as I didn't say Goddamnit anymore."

"Oh, no. Oh, Brendan! Why are you still wearing Mommy's makeup? I told you to go wash it all off, Son."

The young boy only pointed to his sister, who replied, "I told him to keep it on, because it's my birthday."

"Well, keep it on then, Son. But you can't have any cake and ice cream until you take it off." The boy bolted from the room to wash off his makeup.

"He makes such a pretty girl, though!" Kate protested.

"Just eat cake, dear." Mrs. Stevens cut a piece and put it on a little paper plate.

Kate took the plate from her mother and shouted excitedly, "Cookie Monster eat cake!" She then proceeded to shove the entire portion into her mouth at once while muttering through the mass of it, "Yum yum yum yum yum!"

Bradley took the opportunity to slip out of the room, away from all of the insane little girls. He went to the phone and dialed Ann's number.

"Hello," came the harsh sound of Ann's mother's voice.

"Mrs. Maryweather. Hi! This is Bradley. May I please speak with Ann?"

"Ann isn't taking your calls, Bradley," the woman spoke frostily. "I think you'd better stay away from here from now on."

"But ... she wasn't in school today. Is she sick?"

"Goodbye, Bradley. Don't call here again." A click and a dial tone followed her harsh words.

Bradley stood dazed for a long moment, before at last he slowly lowered the phone back down to the receiver. He was still in a daze when his mother came into the room.

"Oh, Bradley! I just don't know what to do with her! Who will ever want to marry a girl who

talks like a sailor, or Cookie Monster for that matter! I'm trying so hard to set a good example."

Bradley spoke absently as he walked towards the stairs, "Mom, you're worrying about nothing. She's only seven."

"Oh, are you all right, dear?"

"Yeah," he said, as he began to climb the stairs. "I'm just fine."

It was dark by the time Ray returned to the hotel, and he had a lot on his mind; distracting things. He was glad. He had so much to keep him from thinking on dark secrets. He so wanted to get a good look at this mysterious Valen Alexas for himself. Tom's wife Abigail had slipped at dinner and told Ray what she wasn't supposed to. There had been another murder, and the body had been found in their own back yard. Tom had found it early that very morning. Ray was excited to have this to think on. The victim's throat had been ripped out, and there was another vampire picture found in the victim's hand.

Ray turned the lock on his hotel room door and entered. Darkness surrounded him as he

closed the door. He took a deep breath, looking forward to sleep, and he turned on the lights.

“Oh, fuck!” The room was trashed. The bed was turned over, his suitcase was empty, the contents spread across the room. The drawers were pulled from the nightstand and the dresser, likewise emptied. The dresser and the night stand themselves were lying face down on the floor.

Ray covered his face with both hands and moaned loudly in outrage. “Oh, no! No! No!” He went into the bathroom and turned on the light. The lid was off of the toilet, the cabinets were opened. Towels lay everywhere. Ray hit the wall with his fist angrily several times. “Damn it! This is not happening!”

He looked up at the mirror, and he found something written there in red. Was it blood? He couldn’t tell, and he didn’t want to know. He wanted to hear from Lee now more than ever. He needed to know that Lee had gotten away. He read the message on the mirror aloud, “Genesis 6:4” He puzzled over it. “What the hell?”

Ray left the bathroom and searched the mess of his room for the hated Gideons Bible, repeating the verse over and again to himself

until he had uncovered the book and looked up the chapter. He read aloud, “ ‘There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.’ ”

Ray dropped the Bible to the floor and turned red with rage, remembering the words of the man, or whatever it had been, that he had been confronted by in Ireland; the being that had followed him there: Christian Rivers.

‘I’m Christian Rivers of the Nephilim. We just want to help you out. We aren’t like the Sions, but we know what you have. They will try to take it from you at any cost. It’s their most precious secret. They’ll do anything to protect it, you see. If you come with me now, the Nephilim will protect you. We’ve stood against Sion for ages. I don’t want to see things get ugly for you. None of us do.’

Ray had never let the man, or whatever it had been, finish its pitch. He had taken off with his treasure, against the seemingly benevolent warning. He couldn’t make any arrangements without Lee, and he had lost his faith in everyone

else. Why should he trust some other order? They were probably liars too. And now it seemed that his suspicions had been justified. “Lying, inhuman fucks!” For, now the Nephilim, who had claimed to have his best interests at heart when they’d sent Christian Rivers to follow him, seemed to have dropped the pretense. They had made it known that they were no less dangerous than the Order de Sion had been.

Ray slumped down to the floor. When he had just been on the run from one supposedly extinct secret society, it had been a laugh. Now there were two of them, natural enemies, united to take what was his. So much for being distracted.

Ray found a book of matches lying on the floor beside him, and he began to laugh. He took a match out and struck it against the little matchbook, watching the flame come to life. He then put the infant fire to the corner of the Gideons’ little contribution to the mass brainwashing of the Christian world, and he watched the fire grow. He picked the burning book up by a corner, and he took it to the bathroom, where he tossed it into the tub and watched it burn. Ray

giggled as the blaze consumed the book, its golden glow reflected in his glistening eyes. When the book was no more than a pile of ash, Ray turned on the shower to douse it. He then fell to the floor again and started to laugh uncontrollably. All that trouble, and they still hadn't taken it from him.

“If you're listening, Christian, you prick, I don't have it! I don't have it, and neither does Lee, and neither do you!” He laughed himself to tears. And soon the tears took on a life of their own. Ray screamed at the top of his lungs to break his dark train of thought. He screamed until he was out of breath.

Valentinus Alexas met Reverend Michaels at the front door of Nightfire United Methodist Church. “Thank you for meeting me so late, sir.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Alexas. Your situation is rather unique, after all. Let's not waste any time. And by the way, call me Bob.”

“Very well, Bob. And I am Valen.”

“You shortened it. That's clever.” The reverend unlocked the glass door and opened it.

“Clever?”

“I’ve been in Nightfire too long, Valen. Nothing gets by me. You’ve got nothing to worry about though. I keep everybody’s secrets. If I wasn’t good at it, you know the mayor would have gotten me out of this church as quickly as possible, by any means necessary.”

Valen couldn’t help but sound nervous with a stranger claiming to know his secrets. “Of course.” But it was true. The pastor of Nightfire UMC was traditionally the guardian of the town’s deepest secrets. There was no avoiding it; for they were buried deep within the church itself.

Bob Michaels, a short, round, balding, gray-haired man of fifty-seven, led the way with a limp to the stairs. He cackled as he descended them, and Valen followed warily.

Reverend Michaels opened the door to a closet in the large church basement, and he went in. “This is it, Valen. Your guardian angel in a jar.” He cackled some more.

Valen entered the closet and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the glass beaker in the preacher’s hand. “Thank God. I just needed to be

sure. It helps me to sleep. I just needed to know that they couldn't get to me here."

"Sure can't. They've been kept away since August of 1850."

"Yes," Valen said. "My friend assured me that he could smell it at the border, ever so slightly."

"By my understanding, 'ever so slightly' is more than enough to keep 'em out. You're friend, is he one of 'em?"

Valen laughed at this. "No. Not exactly. Well ... let's just say I don't have to worry about him. He got me here safely. He's the only one who could."

"Interesting. I was thinking it odd that one of their own would be a friend of yours. Werewolves tend to band together. If you have one werewolf on your back, you have the whole pack on your trail."

Valen shivered. "Yes. I know, but he isn't ... never mind that. I'd rather not get into it now. We shall just leave it that he is the truest of true friends. And they fear him, as they should."

"So, how did you get mixed up with werewolves, if you don't mind my asking? What did

you do to turn them against you?” He placed the beaker back on the shelf.

Valen smiled and spoke softly, “But I do mind. It goes back a long way. Is that the document?”

Bob looked at the book beneath the beaker of blood. “Oh, yeah. Reverend Paul’s book. The document’s in it.”

“May I ...?”

“Sure thing.” The reverend gently removed the beaker from its resting place and set it aside. He then took the book from the shelf and blew the dust from it before handing it over to Valen.

Valen regarded the book reverently, and he opened it directly to the pages that he sought. “*A Testimony of the Werewolf Plague of 1850*. The account of the pastor who lived through it and captured the werewolf blood from the devilish pack leader. The man who saved Nightfire for all these years by putting the blood in that very beaker. I am in debt to him. Some time, I would like to read this, perhaps to copy it.” He closed it and handed it back to Bob carefully.

“I think that can be arranged, since you already know about that particular little secret. I

assume you know quite a few more as well, if my suspicions are correct, and you have yet to deny that they are. But you must realize, the town government is very nasty when it has to be. These secrets are not to get out.”

“Yes, I know. I ... lived here before, as you know.”

“Yes, I know.” The minister seemed suddenly alarmed. “Oh, rats! I left the door upstairs unlocked!”

Valen smiled. “That’s all right, Bob. Raksha’s got it covered. She’s my devoted beast. She’s waiting for me and won’t let anyone in, I assure you. Besides, it’s time I took my leave. We don’t want to be noticed.”

“Right. So when do you want to come back and read it?”

“I don’t know. I have to take care of some things first. I’ll call you. Thank you for your cooperation, Bob. I will send a donation to your church.”

“Much obliged, Valen. See you around.”

“Yes. You will.” Valen, still smiling, turned and walked away.

Bob stood in the basement alone, marveling at the things he'd seen since he'd arrived in Nightfire, Texas; Valen the latest of them all: the head of Alexas Enterprises. That and so much more.

Bradley Stevens and Samuel Turner took their seats at the bar in the center of Dan Parker's. Sam ordered for both of them. "Two Dr. Peppers, please." He set the money down on the counter.

The bartender, Victoria Parker, a lovely brunette with full and curly hair, took pity on Bradley. "What's the matter, hon? You need some cheerin' up?"

"It 's okay, girl. I got 'im," Sam said.

Ignoring Sam, Bradley looked up at Victoria. "Have you seen Ann today, Vicky? Or anybody else, like Dori or Mati?"

"No, I sure haven't. She hasn't done you wrong, has she?"

Bradley held his head in his fists, resting on his elbows, and he looked down at the bar. "I don't know."

She set the drinks down in front of the two boys. She looked at Sam and pushed his money away. "Here. You cheer him up and it's on the house." She winked at him.

"Thanks." Sam looked at his friend. Bradley had called and needed to talk. He had told Sam all about the phone conversation with Ann's mother, and how he didn't know what he should do. Sam felt bad, because he didn't know what to tell him. They had come to Dan Parker's in hopes that they would run in to somebody who knew what was going on with Ann. Unfortunately, it was late, and most of Ann's friends were probably getting ready for bed.

A voice came from behind them, "Hey! Fancy meeting y'all here!"

Sam turned. "Hey, Ray! What's up, man?"

Bradley, hearing Ray's name, snapped out of his daze and turned around. He waved slightly with three of his fingers.

"What's with him?" Ray asked.

"Ann ain't speakin' to 'im. We don't know why," Sam answered.

Ray pointed to an empty table. “Come on, let’s get a table! Hey, Vicky! Bring me a Dr. Pepper! I can’t afford to get drunk tonight.”

“Sure thing, Ray!” She shook her head and prepared his drink.

After Ray had received his beverage, and the other boys had joined him at a little round table in the front of the building, Ray looked after Victoria. “She wants me. You should have seen her when Tom and I stopped off for a beer earlier this evening. She couldn’t keep her eyes off me.”

“You really are arrogant, aren’t you, Ray?” Sam said.

“It’s well earned, my young friend.” Ray laughed. “So, Bradley, what happened? Tell me, man. I need a distraction.”

“From what?” Bradley asked without caring.

“From ... things.”

Sam’s eyes grew wide, as he looked to the door. “How’s that for a distraction, bro?” He raised his hand and waved at the man who’d just entered the bar and grill. “Yo, Valen! Over here!”

Valen smiled when he recognized Sam. He walked over to the little table, and Raksha

followed. “Sam! I’m so pleased to see you again. I was hoping I would find you tonight.”

Ray took a sip of his drink and said sardonically, “Better invest in turtle necks, Sam.”

Sam just glared at Ray, not at all sure how to respond. He knew to the core of his being that Valen was not a bad guy.

“Hey, mister!” Victoria shouted from the bar. “Your pet’s gonna have to wait outside!”

“Oh. It’s all right. She won’t bother anyone.”

“No,” Vicky said irritably, “it’s not! We have rules here, you know!”

Valen knew Nightfire. He knew that rules of this kind only applied to strangers and were easily bent for friends. He pulled out a hundred dollar bill. “There is a great deal of appreciation in it for you, if you’ll let her stay. And you have my word that she’ll behave.”

Victoria laughed out loud. “Sure thing, love. Whatever you say.” She went back to her work.

Ray spoke again, “She’d better invest in turtle necks too.”

Valen looked at Ray as though he were a painting. His eyes were unblinking, and he seemed quite taken. “Raymond Aleister Don.”

“How did you know my name, you freak?”

Valen pulled something out of his coat pocket. “You left your wallet in front of my house this afternoon. I was hoping to track you down. It’s good fortune that I’ve found you *and* Sam.”

“Well I guess it all depends on your perspective.”

Bradley was drawn out of his stupor by the tension building between Ray and Valen. He had forgotten his earlier troubles and realized that a possible killer was about to sit at their table and perhaps even join them for a drink.

Samuel was just nervous, because he liked Valen. He wanted Ray and Bradley to know that Valen was okay. “Why don’t you sit down, Val?”

Valen regarded Ray. “If it’s not going to put anyone out.”

Ray sat back and held up his hands. “Oh, no! I needed a distraction tonight! This is it! Sit!”

Valen pulled out a chair and took a seat. He smiled at Bradley.

Ray shouted to Victoria, “Hey, Vicky! Bring us another Dr. Pepper!”

Valen seemed taken by surprise. “Oh, no! Thank you but, I never drink,” he paused and considered his words, “Dr. Pepper.”

Ray stared at Valen for a long moment, then he rolled his eyes in disgust. “Okay! He’s a psycho!” He shouted back to the bartender, “Never mind! He only drinks blood!”

Valen stood abruptly. “I’m sorry. It seems I’ve chosen a bad time to intrude.”

Sam spoke up, “Valen, wait! He just can’t help but piss people off. It’s a personality disorder. He can’t help it!”

“Oh! Right, Sam!” Ray protested. “So when this guy turns into a bat and flies away, is that what you’re gonna call it? A personality disorder?”

“If you have something to say to me, Mr. Don, then do so. No need to hold back, sir.”

Ray looked up at Valen and smiled madly, as though he were meeting Damnation and laughing it in the face. “All right. I think you’re the Vampire Killer. I think you let your ugly pet there rip people open, and you put a picture in their

hands, thinking that life is just like *Scooby-Doo*, and you have to leave your corny, little clues, so that we all think it's a vampire! I mean, come on, 'I never drink ... Dr. Pepper.' That is the most blatantly vampiric thing that I have ever heard anyone say in my life! Don't tell me you didn't think that one through!"

Valen's face was like stone, devoid of emotion. "I see. I am sorry you feel this way, Mr. Don. But I am telling you, I am not this mass murderer. I am Valen Alexas, the head of Alexas Enterprises. I am here to kick back for a while and restore the old Alexas mansion. I hope that, in time, you'll come to trust me. I hope that, in time, we can be friends." He turned to Sam. "Samuel. I have a proposition for you. Raksha seems to like you, and I anticipate that Mr. Don is not the only person in town who is going to try to pay me a visit when I'm ... away. I am usually otherwise occupied during the day, and I leave Raksha to guard the house. It would be better for my windows and my future relations with the people of this town, if there were someone else there during the day; someone who can speak

with visitors on my behalf and keep Raksha in line. I would pay you very well.”

Samuel was surprised. “Well ...”

Ray put a hand over the younger man’s mouth and answered for him, “He’ll think it over, Vlad. Now go on, and don’t kill anybody I know.” He took his hand off of Sam’s mouth.

“Actually,” Sam said angrily, “I *would* like to think it over first, and I could’ve told you so myself.”

Valen nodded. “I’m glad that you will consider it. Now, please excuse me. I fear that I have disrupted the atmosphere here, and I do have ... other matters to attend to. Good night.” He bowed slightly and left the building, followed by his loyal wolf.

Sam was ticked off. “Don’t ever speak for me, Ray!”

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t want you to rush in to anything.”

“Well I’m not stupid! I never rush into things!”

“I’m sorry!”

“Good. I forgive you.” Sam took a big gulp of his drink.

Bradley spoke as though he'd just been awakened from a dream, "Man, Ray. You're dead! That guy's vicious! And you called him a bad *Scooby-Doo* episode to his face!" Bradley began to laugh in amazement at the entire scene.

"Well," Sam ventured, "he said he wasn't the mass murderer."

"Oh, yeah," Ray said. "And we all know that mass murderers are legendary for their honesty."

"Don't be a smart ass, Ray. I'm serious. I just have a good feelin' about 'im. He can't be the mass murderer."

"Well," Ray regarded the money that Valen had left by his wallet on the table. "I'd have a good feeling about a guy who leaves hundred dollar tips for absolutely nothing too, if he'd just offered me a job as his house boy."

"Ray," Bradley interjected. "Cool down, man! You're going off on Sam! You're going too far."

"I'm sorry." He looked them both in the eyes. "I really mean it. I'm sorry. I've had a really bad day, and I'm taking it out on the world I guess."

“That’s okay, Ray,” Sam said. “We all have bad days.” He forced himself to grin, and then he found it genuine.

Bradley was still concerned. “Ray, you might have just made yourself the mass murderer’s next target! What were you thinking? This guy could be dangerous.”

“Well,” Ray gulped down the last of his Dr. Pepper, “Bradley, that’s just the kind of excitement I’ve been looking for. Seems I’ll have no choice other than to ponder it all night.” He giggled and held up his glass. “Hey, Vicky! How ’bout a refill!”

I can't believe this! Audri Stevens was in miserable pain, as she walked outside towards the car. *I'll have to hurry, so that the children don't miss me.* She was suffering from a terrible headache, and Bradley was nowhere to be found. She had to go get some aspirin from the convenience store. Fortunately she had already put Brendan and Kate to bed, so they would never know that they'd been left at home alone. She dug in her purse for the car keys. She pulled them out, but

was stopped from unlocking the door by a sound. She turned to find it.

No one was there.

She turned back to the car and tried to turn the difficult lock. Just as she finally got it to click, she noticed a reflection in the window and gasped. “Oh!” She caught herself. “Bradley, Halloween is still three weeks away.” She turned to face him. “I have to go to the ... you’re not—!”

The man put a hand over her mouth and turned her around, pulling her close to him so that he was behind her. She felt something sharp at her throat, and she began to struggle. She felt his breath on her neck, as he whispered, “Don’t scream.”

Next: “Victory of the Vampire”

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*.

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