

## Wilde Nights

Coyotes sat in a circle around the girl. She huddled in the center of them and I could smell her fear from where I stood some short distance away. We were out in the desert about a mile outside of Cactus Ridge, New Mexico. High above, the gibbous moon lit the desert sky like a huge white bonfire in the sky; well to my eyes it did anyway. To the girl, Marion, she probably couldn't see much beyond the coyotes that prisoned her.

Coyotes are not exactly the traditional wolves we vampires were supposed to be able to summon, but then again, I'm not much of a traditionalist. These ten had answered my call and now served me by preventing Marion from leaving the spot where she'd come to cry. You see, Marion was having troubles at home and often came out into the desert to think about them and to otherwise dwell on how poorly life had treated her. Hmm. That's not exactly fair to her. She was indeed having some very real difficulties. Her problem was that instead of doing anything about them, she always came out here and thought about them. All thought and no action leads to great frustration - which was exactly the circumstance Marion now found herself in.

All right, so maybe *right now* she was terrified by the circle of coyotes around her, but she'd been frustrated for some time now. She was miserable and didn't know what to do. That's where I came in.

See, I've been looking for a companion. Marion is young, beautiful, and I believe, except for her tendency towards inaction, quite smart. I have been looking for the perfect woman. I've had it

up to here with women who look at immortality as a tool to riches, power, and revenge. Great care had to be taken when choosing someone for immortality. If the woman was too weak of mind and character, she could very well go insane. Something I know all about from painful experience... but that's another tale for another night. The woman I sought must have a reason to want to not only survive the transformation but to become a vampire. If she did not, she would either simply die of blood loss or she'll turn into one of the soulless. Many would be vampire simply died instead of transforming. Sadly, despite a great deal of research, many of the why's and how's of creating new vampires remained a mystery even after all these years.

Little by little the fear was starting to leave Marion's eyes. Soon, I would make my dramatic appearance.

What were the soulless you might wonder? Well, I'll tell you. Soulless were those who survived the blood drain but neither turned into vampires nor died. I've heard them called zombies before but that's simply not accurate. Soulless did indeed have willpower of their own. Zombies by definition did not. For that matter, soulless was not a truly appropriate name either. All I've really noticed them lacking was the emotions they carried in life and some physical feeling. I think you could probably miff one of them but it would probably take a deliberate and a major effort to do so. As a side note, I will go ahead and mention that it was possible to upset or even anger a very young soulless. It took time for the emotions to fade. Of course, another couple of obvious differences were that zombies tended to fall apart and had a serious odor problem. The soulless did not have these traits. A fact for which I remained quite grateful.

Back to blood drainings. As I mentioned, a number of those who were drained died. Permanently. Of the remainder slightly less than half became vampires... the rest transformed into

one of the soulless. I had a theory concerning a fourth possible outcome but more on that later. Marion has stood up and it was time for my entrance.

The growling of the coyotes stopped. Into the silence I said, "What an interesting array of companions you've chosen for yourself. Most appropriate to the desert." I suddenly 'appeared' before her. Actually what I did was a combination of flying and blurring her perceptions for just a split second but the effect was that I simply appeared out of nowhere.

Predictably she was speechless.

She drank juice while I pretended to sip coffee. The diner was not my idea of a nice place but it did have kind of an odd, homey feel to it. Not quite what I'd call charming. I suspected 'southwestern' was the closest I'm likely to get to accurately describing it.

The coyotes were two hours and a long walk into town away. Right now, they seemed to belong to another world. My world. The world I was going to try to persuade Marion to walk into of her own free will.

She still didn't understand how I'd run off the coyotes and had said so several times. I commented on their odd behavior and the good timing of my appearance. She thought that after their initial startlement they should have come back to attack. I suggested that coyotes were generally scavengers and we left it at that.

A lot of conversation followed. We ended up with her talking about her family. Most of that was about her father and how he used his drinking as an excuse to lose his temper. Claimed he

couldn't control it. Like his temper was a thing outside him and not a product of his thought patterns.

'What a loser' as the colloquial goes.

Not that I'm perfect by any means. Or without an occasional spat of temper. Why only fifty or sixty years ago (give or take a few) I lost my own temper. I'm not sure if it was the Nazis or an annoying old friend which set me off. Maybe both. At any rate, I do not deny that I was in control of my own actions the whole time or use it as an excuse to distance myself from those actions.

End of sermon.

We spoke on long into the night and had several follow up conversations in the nights that followed. And something beautiful began happening. Slowly but surely, Marion began to take control of her life.

Marion and I sat in the desert under the full moon. We talked for a long while under the cactus while she nibbled on some of the foods from the picnic basket I'd brought. She told me of her hopes and dreams and I told her about some of the historical novels I'd written and some of the places I had visited in my travels. We have become good friends since our first meeting here in the desert. She hasn't asked why I didn't visit her during the day but I could see the question lurking behind her eyes. It is a question I didn't intend to answer until our friendship had moved on to the next level. I hoped that soon we would become lovers. It had been a very long time since I've had a lover. Marion's friendship stirred my blood but I know I cannot move too quickly lest the 'oddities' my life

was surrounded with combine to drive her away or into insanity. Patience was not always my strongest trait but I will push it to the limits for a worthy goal. Her friendship alone has been worth my efforts thus far. Marion's love was a most worthwhile cause and I planned to pursue it with all the tenacity within me.

A couple of weeks later we met by the Old Kensington Pond. A lovely artesian wellspring not exactly in the middle of nowhere but close to it. She had ridden her bicycle and I had flown. When I told her that, she thought it was a wonderful joke and I laughed with her as though it were. Just another of those 'oddities' that will add up to make sense once she knew the whole truth of the matter.

Once again we picnicked. We talked for a long while about our favorite colors and the music we liked and fashion and a myriad other little things that meant so much. I was truly in a world of delight in her company.

She started to fiddle around with the top button of her blouse. I decided that this might be a good time to get the wine glasses I'd hidden before my arrival.

"You're not leaving are you?" she asked with just a tinge of uncertainty in her voice.

"Oh, no. I have a surprise for you. I'll be right back, it won't take a minute."

"Ooh, I like surprises. Hurry back."

"Count on it milady, count on it."

So, I hurried over to the glasses and the two bottles of wine (bloodwine for me and a lovely

vintage of Red that Jack had found for just this occasion for her). I was on my way back when I noticed a man sitting across the pond. He seemed to have on a headband of some sort which I suspected might be nightvision equipment. With a bit of additional reconnaissance, I determined it was indeed nightvision goggles. A voyeur.

Fortunately for him, I was in too good a mood for anything other than light punishment. I flew around behind the unsuspecting scum and gave him a light chop to the base of the neck. Down he went. Hmm. Not just a viewing lens but a video recorder too. A pervert with an expense account. I flew him over a rise and left him near what I hoped was an ant bed. I set the recorder under a large rock and it made a most satisfying crunching noise when I rolled the rock back to its original position. Even if he found it later, it wouldn't do him any good.

Quickly, I returned to my stash, poured the wine, and dropped a little silver necklace with a heart-shaped token into her glass. I then hurried back to the scene of the picnic.

Marion sat exactly where I'd left her except now she was toying with the fifth button down. Only two to go. Suddenly I was glad I'd chosen loose pants for the occasion. It had been a long time since I've been in love or lust either one. The combination of both made me feel so very alive.

"Glad to see you made it back. I was starting to get lonely." She smiled into the darkness and the button she'd been fiddling with came free.

"Hmm." My attention wandered back up to her lovely face. "My heart grew heavy at the thought of leaving you by yourself for even a moment. However, I simply had to gamble that my little surprise would make up for my lapse in manners."

"Bad manners? From you, Alex? Never. Hmm, now just what surprise might you be talking about? What do you have behind your back?" She leaned forward with eye-catching effect.

With a little flourish I presented her wine glass. "If I do say so myself, it's a lovely vintage of Chateau Rouge (an unfortunately defunct private vineyard). A '64 I believe." I didn't mention which century it was a 64 of.

She accepted the glass with a smile then stopped herself just before taking a sip. She held the glass up to her ear. "There's something in here." Her smile grew wider.

"Really? I wonder how what could have gotten in there?" She didn't believe my show of ignorance for a moment.

With her left hand she started fiddling with the next button. At the same time, she also began gently swishing the wine around. It took me a few moments to notice the swishing. Did I mention that she wasn't wearing a brassiere? Perhaps now you understand some small part of my infatuation beyond the facts the she's a lovely young woman and I was falling in love with her. Not to mention the fact that I've been without a lover for a long time. A very long time.

"Hmm. What could it be?" She took a long sip. "Mmm. This tastes wonderful. Where'd you get it?"

"Oh, a friend of mine found it somewhere. I forget where he said it came from. Perhaps you might ask me again later." I took a sip of my bloodwine (also courtesy of Jack). "I have to admit, he did a great job in finding this." My fingers and toes began to tingle. More the company than the wine I suspected.

"I'm in quite a quandary now, thanks to you," she told me sadly as the button gave way. Her nimble fingers immediately moved to the last one. "I want to find out what the surprise is so I must drink this down immediately; but I also want this wine to last forever. Whatever shall I do?" She was looking at me with the largest, most beautiful eyes under God's sky.

My voice caught for a second. "Yes," I said mock seriously, "That is quite a problem. But wait! I believe I have the answer. If memory serves, there is about three quarters of a bottle of wine just back that awaayyy." The last button had come undone.

"How wonderful! That solves my little dilemma perfectly." She took the glass in both hands, arched her back and leaned waayyyy back to drain the glass. A most inspirational sight. Words cannot begin to describe so I won't even try.

"Whatever could this be in the bottom of my wineglass?"

I moved over for a closer look. "Hmm. It looks like someone has left a necklace in your wine. How clumsy of them. I bet whoever lost it will want it back."

"Well, that's too bad," she declared with a smile. "It wound up in *my* wineglass and possession is nine tenths of the law you know. Ergo, it is now *my* necklace." She held it up to look at in the moonlight.

"You've simply overwhelmed any argument I might have had to the contrary. By virtue of your great knowledge of the law, I feel I must agree with your legal interpretation. Please allow me to put it on you."

"How gallant of you. Please do so. Besides, I don't think I could see the clasp to work it, even with the moonlight." She leaned back against one of the boulders.

I took a healthy swig, draining the last of my bloodwine and took the necklace from her. The touch of her hand was magic. I then opened the clasp and began trailing the pendant across her bellybutton, up her belly, between her breasts finally up to her neck. I leaned my body against hers and kissed her while fastening the clasp around her neck. I then put my full attention into the kiss.

Sometime later she came up for air. As you may have guessed, I have a distinct advantage

in that area. "Oh, wow," was all she said.

I took her hand and kissed her palm, my hand caressing hers as I did so. She took one of my hands and did the same. She pulled me forward and began nibbling at my ear. My hand moved to her belly and began sliding upward. Her breathing had become much heavier; I echoed it. I must confess to some surprise when she whispered, "Alex dearest... would you go get the rest of the wine?"

"Certainly my dear, Marion. Anything you wish." I got up, adjusted my pants and moved down the trail towards my wine stash.

Kneeling next to the wine bottles, I wondered if maybe I was pushing things along too quickly. I took a swig of bloodwine from the bottle as I considered the possibility. Got to be careful doing that. Drinking bloodwine that is. Too much and my eyes would start turning red. Standing, I tingled all over and my perceptions sharpened further yet. I'd had quite a meal earlier so my fangs weren't a problem as they could sometimes be when I was feeling both hungry and romantic. My appetite for blood wasn't the problem. Maybe my appetite for love was a case of a little too much, too soon. The possibility that I'd pushed her too far troubled me. Was my impatience getting in the way of my resolve to let this relationship progress at it's own pace?

My reverie was interrupted by the sound of her voice drifting to me from down the trail. "Care for a swim Alex?" The question was followed by a splash.

Then again, maybe things were going just fine.

Wine bottle in hand, I headed back down the trail unbuttoning my shirt as I went along. A swim sounded just dandy.

Weeks passed and we floated through them as lovers and friends. During that time she graduated high school, got a job at that diner, told her old man off and moved out into an apartment. Pretty active my darling Marion.

Now it occurs to me that some people might think it unseemly that a man of my age should become romantically linked with a young woman not even in her twenties. However, if one based this opinion simply on our age difference, any still-living human woman would fall under the same category of offense. A young mind is a flexible mind. Too much age and knowledge of the world led to a certain inflexibility of thought. Marion retained the flexible mind of youth but the abuse she had suffered had brought about a certain maturity that called to me despite her young age.

Marion was definitely her own woman. This became abundantly clear when she refused my offer to move in with me. She wanted to be on her own for at least a short while before she made herself 'dependant on another man for shelter' as she so quaintly put it. She held a fire inside her that was undeniable. Part of the reason I love her so, I supposed.

Time passed and our lives became further intertwined. I have allowed her little glimpses into my world. Let her catch glances of what I really am. Given her access to know the real me to more of an extent than anyone had come to know me in a very long time. Her curiosity and love were quickly overcoming her fear. She no longer shook her head when she noticed me moving faster than normal people moved. She has stopped asking why I don't visit her during the day. I have left a trail of clues and she now has strong suspicions of where that trail leads.

And yet, still she follows that path.

Many months passed and tonight she has come over to my house to spend the night. This shall be her final evening as a mortal soul... one way or another. After many long hours and nights of explaining about the shadow world and vampires in particular, she now knows everything about what she's getting into.

I had been worried about what might happen when she actually figured out I was a vampire. Despite the trail of clues I'd left, I had expected her to not believe. My rather loose-knit plan had been to tell her but later rather than sooner. But she'd seen the clues that I'd left. And she'd believed. When it came to flexibility of mind, I had chosen better than I had dared dream in this day and age. Once I confirmed her suspicions, she insisted that I make her a vampire immediately. Instead, I set her a lengthy period of soul searching as I explained the dangers as well as the benefits of being a vampire. I also told her about the shadow world and the wonders and terrors that lay within it. She couldn't hear enough of it.

In truth, once she said she wanted to become a vampire, it was all I could do to make myself wait. It was my fondest dream come true. I wondered, I hoped, and I feared. I prayed to God that I might truly have the immortal company of a lover at last.

Tonight was the night.

Jack Cosgrove is my soulless companion. We met long ago and have been best friends ever since we recovered from our initial fight. Jack took care of me. That's probably the easiest and most accurate way to put it. He saw to it that the house was cleaned, stocked the larder, made sure the neighbors had no idea that I was around in the first place, and gave me something constant in my life besides the blood of other people... which he also procured. He is my friend, butler, mentor, and numerous other roles, all rolled into one. He's one of the few people who could tell me the things I did not want to hear.

"She's not coming back Alexander." His quiet voice was almost tinged with emotion. Uncommon in one of the elder soulless. I'd known. Of course I'd known. Even the longest transformations didn't last past four a.m. of the third night. This was the fourth evening. I'd known, but somehow it hadn't been real. Not until Jack said it. Damn him. Bless him. Damn me. Damn.

For a moment, I just stood there before dropping down to my knees and crying. I'd hoped. A false hope after the third evening but a hope I had clung to nonetheless. Now that hope was gone and for the moment, all I had was grief. Why couldn't she have wanted it just a little bit more? Why did she have to die? Why hadn't I been more patient? Why? Why? Why?

Time passed. I mourned her loss and my own bereavement. Then out of nowhere, suddenly I was mad. Very mad. Killing mad. Not at anyone in particular. Just those who still walked while my Marion lay dead. Someone had to pay for my pain. Pay in blood.

It was Jack who stopped me from going out and taking my agony out on some innocent person or people. He didn't physically stop me. While Jack is one of the strongest of the soulless, he was still no match for me at night. He just used his weird intuition and that cold, soulless logic on me and hit me where I was weakest.

"She wouldn't want you to die Alex. Not meaninglessly. Nor would she have wanted you to kill someone for no reason. You've never murdered before and I think she would be absolutely horrified if she were the reason you became a murderer." He paused a moment. His next sentence was almost inaudible. "Possibly horrified to the point of becoming a ghost."

I had already been losing my anger and the impetus to leave. But his statement about her possibly becoming a ghost destroyed the last of any resolve I might have held in reserve. Becoming a ghost was a fate worse than death from what I've seen. I've met one ghost and heard tell of others and it seemed to me that most would have been happier in hell. Then again, one might reasonably call a ghost's existence a form of hell in and of itself. I simply couldn't imagine Marion as a ghost. Wouldn't imagine it. And I couldn't do anything that might possibly cause it to happen. I never doubted Jack's word. He never lied; had not lied even back when he had lived. And he certainly had not done so since he'd died. Never. He's been wrong once or twice, but he's never lied.

Momentum from my earlier anger had carried me halfway to the front door where I'd stopped. Now, I couldn't move. I didn't want to move. Didn't want to think. I just wanted to go away from myself. For a while I just stood there, totally devoid of thought. Sometime later, Jack took my hand and guided me down into my bedchamber. He put me to bed and left. He returned with a glass of bloodwine which he handed to me. Without thought, I drank it down.

Bloodwine normally invigorates me and makes me hypersensitive. I don't know if he put something in it or if he actually did know some magic as I'd sometimes suspected, but my senses dulled and the world faded away on one of the worst evenings of my life.

Unfortunately for me, the worst day of my life followed.

My dream of Jack, wearing plate armor and shaking me hard enough to rattle my teeth, faded into bizarre reality. It was daytime and my thoughts were as leaden as my limbs.

"What?" was all I managed to croak after a long moment of this rough treatment. His armor creaked as he shifted around.

"Are you awake? This is really important Alexander." I managed a little more consciousness. When he called me Alexander, he was either annoyed or emphasizing a point. He hadn't been annoyed in centuries. Therefore, invariably, it was something very important. I struggled to focus my thoughts. After a moment, I more or less succeeded and sat up and faced him to show it.

"All right Alex. Here it is. Goodbye."

"What?" Now I was more confused than ever. Why would he wake me up during the day just to go somewhere?

"I have to go now Alex." He wasn't exactly speaking slowly but as you can tell he was feeding me information in little tiny bits. Just as well. I was having a hard enough time taking it in as it was.

"Where are you going Jack?" I was still a little muzzy from waking up much too early. Memory was still vague but I was pretty sure that plate armor was not acceptable accouterment even for parades nowadays but I wasn't positive.

"Alex, I'm... I'm going to heaven."

"What?" I repeated. More snappy comebacks to strange statements.

"I messed up last night Alex. This is going to be hard for you to hear but you must." He

paused a long moment before continuing. "When I took Marion out so that her body could be found, I saw a strange man. I didn't recognize him but he seemed to see me for a moment even in the pitch-blackness of the new moon. He wasn't any sort of supernatural that I recognized, so I passed it off as my imagination.

"For various reasons I now believe that this man may be one of the Hunters..."

Marion. Her very name stabbed me in the heart with a dagger of agonized loss. With renewed memory came the urge to scream; somehow I held it in. Then his last sentence caught hold and I was wholly awake.

Hunters. I could hear the capital 'H' when he said the word. The name for the bogeymen of vampires everywhere. An insane society amongst vampiredom. Not really true vampires but an offshoot of the species. These crazed people hunted down other vampires to drink their blood; occasionally to eat their hearts as well. I could almost appreciate the irony, however the thought of someone attacking me in my daytime state was not really conducive to either my sense of irony or poetic justice. Just my sense of fear.

Now I'm not squeamish about drinking blood or even about drinking another vampire's blood. However, I limit my activities to those who are doing deeds detrimental to our species or the human species. These creatures did not. They killed all they found and they seemed to find a surprising number of us. I may live by the fang but I had no intention of dying by the fang. Oops. Jack had fallen silent. Gussed I should have been paying more attention. If he would have brought me some blood, it certainly would have helped me wake up a bit.

"Where did I lose you Alex?" The veritable patience of a saint.

"Hunters." All I could manage in a strangely husky voice.

"Right, hunters. At any rate this hunter and about thirty other cops have the house surrounded. The cops think I killed Marion. And I'm going to let them keep on thinking that. When I'm done, they'll think it forever and they won't even look for you. Alex. I'm going to go kill the Hunter... and I'm going to die in the process."

My limbs were still a bit leaden but my mind was beginning to work pretty well now. I started to say something but he stopped me with a raised hand.

"It's time for me to die Alex. I've done and seen things far beyond my allotted span of years. My life has been the stuff of which dreams and legends are made. Life has been good Alex but it's time for you to move beyond me and for me to move beyond you. I want to see the other side Alex. I want to meet God and ask Him about the wonder and the sadness, the grief and the joys that make up this life... and I want to free Alice." I hadn't seen him this alive since he was alive... so to speak.

My mind and emotions were doing a sort of repeat of last night. I was ignoring the really bad parts and concentrating on something that was inconsequential. "Free Alice? That ghost in Burgundy? How? Why?"

"Yes, the ghost we met in Burgundy. I liked her and I felt sorry for her. As a former knight it was my sacred duty to rescue and protect people like her - even when that someone mainly needed to be protected from herself. She's haunted my conscience since we left France that time so very long ago. Memories of the way I was and of how I wanted to live my life came back to me with a vengeance after that. Duty, honor, pride, everything I've devoted to you for so long, I've deprived the world of. Alex, way down deep inside me I am still a knight. But now it's only deep down inside. I've got to rescue this one last damsel before that spark of valor dies away completely and leaves me truly as our circle calls transforms like me: soulless.

"Alex, I've researched and studied this a lot. I believe that when I die for real, I will have a momentary burst of psychic energy. Some vampires can use that burst for their death scream or their final retribution. However, I believe that I can use it to cross the astral plane to her and free her of her torment and nightmares. We may be an ocean away from her but space has no meaning to the dead. If I have correctly interpreted what I've read and studied, I can free her, Alex. At least I think I can. She's already suffered more than anyone deserves to. I almost convinced her to give up her grief and hatred last time. I've thought about it a lot since then. In the last few days, I've learned a lot about grief and hatred from what you've had to go through. This time I will convince her. I can feel it with my very soul. I've got to try or failure is guaranteed.

"My only concern is leaving you. You are my best friend. I don't want to leave you alone Alex. Especially not after Marion's death. Fate has not been kind to you of late my friend, but God never gives us more burdens than we can handle. You've become dependent on me for your special needs as I've become dependent on you for my spiritual and emotional needs. It is time we both grew up. It's time you fended for yourself and I put away logic and dusted off my emotions. My own emotions, not yours."

"I can't believe this! You're going to get yourself killed because you're tired of renting houses and laying out my clothes for the evening?" Anger was making its way slowly to the forefront of my thoughts.

"No Alex, I'm not," he responded quietly. "It's time I found the real me by giving up this existence and moving on to the next. My own transformation was not as kind as yours." He held up a hand forestalling my interruption. "I'm not complaining. As I said earlier, I've lived a great life and I wouldn't trade my past for anything.

"But I'm not a malleable mortal any more. The old me is almost gone and I don't like the new me that's emerging. My emotions were mostly deadened by my transformation but they were still there. Lately though, they've been virtually non-existent. You have no idea how horrified and wretched I *almost* felt when I barely mourned Marion's death. Alex, I'm losing touch with my soul and it is not something I can live without.

"It's just a passing phase Jack, that's all. You'll get over it. It's like mortal depression, it will go away if you just give it a chance." Anger was still under the surface but at the moment panic was closer still. I was really starting to get really upset.

"No. It's nothing at all like depression. Think back Alex. When was the last time you remember me laughing or chuckling? Shedding a tear? Getting annoyed? I can't remember and I've got a damn good memory. I'm scared, Alex. In a calm logical way that is not my own, I'm terrified. I'm fading away. Soon, I'll be nothing but one of these so-called robots. I can't let that happen. I owe it to myself."

All my arguments died. He'd done so much for me. How could I stop him from doing this one final thing for himself... and for me. That last bit clicked a thought into place.

"I'll go with you Jack. We'll go out together, guns blazing as they say in showbiz. Together 'til the very end. You can hold them off 'til nightfall and then we can give them a real run for their money." I was getting kinda excited at the thought of facing unbeatable odds.

"No." That stopped me cold again.

"You have got your own cross to bear. You've got to follow your own destiny. My path leads to the other side of life. Yours leads elsewhere... for the moment." He clasped my shoulders strongly. "Embrace this change my friend as I do. Go out and do things you've never done before.

Live a little as you used to instead of hopping from one small town to the other. Don't settle for simply existing any more. It's time for you to once more take life by the throat and wring every drop you can from her."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I was overwhelmed and had this odd feeling that this was just a dream. I desperately wanted it to be only a dream but I knew it wasn't. I could only delude myself so far.

He then walked across the room and picked up a vial and an injector that sat beside a medical kit I didn't remember seeing before. He proceeded to fill the syringe with the entire contents of the vial.

All those things I'd been trying hard not to hear had finally made it down to my emotional center.

"I don't want to be alone." Was all I could think of to say.

He tapped the syringe for a moment then looked me in the eyes. "Alex. For all intents and purposes you've been alone for the last twenty years. This is nothing but a shade of my former self. Everything I used to feel - all the love and friendship - is gone. It took your grief, my lack of reaction to it, and a big mistake in judgement on my part, but I can see now that I'm practically gone already. I'm just sorry that the timing is so terrible for you."

He injected himself through the mail coif around his neck. Evidently he misunderstood my lost look as one of curiosity.

"A powerful stimulant," he said, holding up the vial. "After I'm gone, they're going to wonder why I was so hard to kill. Maybe this will also give them the semblance of a motive for my supposed murder of Miss Flanders." We both knew just how useless drugs were to our transformed bodies

(except bloodwine and it's a special case).

"I'm not letting you do this." When all else fails be stubborn. It had helped me in the past. Perhaps it would help this time. I stood up and was surprised to note that I wasn't the least bit dizzy. It had been a long time since I'd bothered waking up during the day. Evidently, my ability to function during the day had improved.

"You don't have a choice," he declared. "It's still a long time until nightfall and until then you're no match for me physically. Beyond that it's my life, pale shadow though it is, and therefore my decision. I can't go on like this and I won't. I would like to die knowing that I have your blessing, but I'm going regardless." He walked over to the secret door leading to the main house. There he strapped on his shield with its formerly infamous griffin-with-swordpierced-head blazon. He then picked up the sword I'd given him for Christmas a few years ago.

He pulled the door partway open and then stopped. "May I have your blessing?" I don't know. Maybe it was the almost hopeful look he wore on his face. Perhaps it was the impassioned speech about his spirit and his soul that he'd given in his dead voice. Bloody tears streaming down my face, I managed to choke out an affirmative.

"Thank you Alex. You know don't you, that I'll always be with you in spirit." I sat down and covered my face with my hands. More quietly and almost with emotion, "Always with you my friend, always." I could hear the door almost shut, then open again. "I don't want to depart on a sour note, but if you try to follow me, I'll break your legs and barricade you in here. Goodbye my friend. May God's love guide and protect you." The door closed with a click that to me seemed more like the sounding of the trump of doom.

I sat and cried for my best friend and for my already lonely self.

Jack acquitted himself well. Of course in this age of cameras and electronics it would be all over the television news. The mad drug addict with a sword and suit of armor who killed the girl and then stormed police in a suicide attack. The footage was spectacular and made every national news and gossip show on prime time. Dazedly, I watched the video through the front window of Spencer Electronics' downtown store.

In the scene, the house was surrounded by police of varying kinds. Jack charged out of the house far faster than anyone wearing plate armor had a right to do. The cops weren't surprised. Bullets dented his armor but that didn't slow him or seem to otherwise hinder him. He charged right into their midst shield-rushing several as he went by. From the outset it was obvious that the hunter knew who Jack was after. The hunter, a state policeman named David Lee Smith, as the reporters so helpfully informed everyone, pushed down two deputies, jumped into their car and attempted to flee the scene. Unfortunately for him, Jack was there by then.

The wheels smoked but the car had just started to move as Jack's overhand swordstroke cut through the front of the car and bisected the engine.

Hmm. Just so I don't lose you, I think I'll interject a quick note about his sword. It's a four foot long broadsword of classic Saxon design. Made of these new, space-age alloys, I'd had it specially made so that it was incredibly dense (and incredibly expensive). That innocent looking sword weighed exactly 120 pounds, six ounces. I had wanted something that would maximize Jack's great strength. Evidently, I got exactly what I wanted.

On to the battle.

Bullets and shot dented Jack's armor and staggered him a bit but he kept on. With a final wrench he managed to remove the sword from the now dysfunctional engine block.

David Smith, the hunter, evidently decided running was no longer really an option. Therefore, he jumped out of the car and grabbed Jack's sword arm and the neck of Jack's breastplate. I could almost see Jack's surprised expression despite the helmet. What I did actually see was the bullet that smashed into the hunter's lower back from behind. Mmm. Looked painful. Getting shot by your cohorts must be a real drag. Unfortunately, in this case it didn't matter squat. Jack had been wrong. This hunter was the real thing - a supernatural. Not a human fanatic. And he just shrugged off the bullet wound. He shifted his balance upwards and then yanked down with all his strength. Like most supernaturals, hunters are quite strong.

Jack slammed down to his knees and the hunter, continuing his motion, ripped Jack's breastplate clean off. If you've never worn armor, you have no idea just how impressive that is. The hunter said something that was not picked up by the microphone and the bad camera angle prevented me from reading his lips. Whatever he said seemed to upset Jack somewhat. Musta been something close to the heart to actually upset Jack. I suppose this is just something else I'll have to wonder about forevermore.

Jack dropped his shield by the expedient means of placing the bottom point into the street and then using his strength to pull against the shield, thus ripping the bindings. That was a pretty impressive as well. Still on his knees, he used his shield arm to give the hunter an uppercut to the guts. The hunter rose about six feet straight off the ground. He probably would have gone higher if it hadn't been necessary for the punch to disconnect his grip on Jack's sword arm. A sword arm that Jack raised slightly.

Jack aimed true and gravity did the rest. Through the heart and out high in the back went the blade. The hunter screamed the last scream and began to convulse, still hanging by the sword. Some vampire deaths were ugly affairs and this one was being recorded for all the world to see and hear (evidently they fixed the sound problem just in time for the world to regret it). His final scream jagged along nerves and seemed to tear the soul. Blood sprayed in thin streamers through the afternoon air.

His flopping around began to slow and the blood only ran instead of spraying. I thought all the flopping around had all been due to involuntary reaction. I guessed Jack thought so as well. Suddenly, the dying David Smith pulled his pistol, placed it against Jack's heart, and pulled the trigger. They both dropped to the street dead.

Again, and for the last time.

Goodbye my friend.

You are missed.

The only seriously injuries to the policemen at the scene (other than David Smith) were a punctured lung from a rib that Jack broke in his shield-rush, a ricochet which grazed someone's head, and a ruptured disk to the man who first tried to pick up the sword. Lessons to be learned and a bit of poetic justice for all concerned. Or perhaps it's simply that my spite overflows. I'll reread this in forty or fifty years and decide the truth of the matter then.

Police still wanted to speak with the murder victim's boyfriend, a pale, dark-haired man known only as Alex. Still, according to inside sources, the murder of Marion Flanders was for all practical purposes, closed.

I really hate modern news services.

Later that night, I found one of the local street gangs in their hideout. Lately, they'd been visiting a lot of trouble upon the people who lived on the south side of town. Tonight, trouble visited them. I barricaded all the doors and then went into the building from the roof. I didn't kill any of them but I sure beat the lot of them badly. It worked out a lot of my frustrations and anger. According to the papers, three were in intensive care from gunshot wounds received by their fellow gang members.

Oh, what fools these mortals be.

That night I dreamed. Not something unusual for a mortal but very rare for myself and other vampires with whom I've spoken. Not to date myself but I've been around for a while and since my *change* I could probably count the number of dreams I've had on some of my fingers and toes. Sort of a depressing thought because I remember that I used to have some good dreams along with the

nightmares and now I have few dreams of any kind, especially the good. Just another little thing that I've lost along the way.

On to my point before I become lost in pathos again. That night I dreamed of Jack and Alice. Jack had on the blue uniform he'd worn the night I met him. Alice was wearing the same white gown she'd worn when I last saw her in France so many years ago. Thankfully, Alice wasn't crying or wailing this time. In fact, she had this sorta shy smile when she looked at Jack that made her beautiful. Jack was also smiling. It hurt to realize how long it had been since I'd seen him smile.

"I was right, Alex. I was able to rescue one last damsel in distress. Be happy for me Alex as I am happy for myself and for Alice." Before I had a chance to say anything he pressed on.

"Alex, I can feel Him. I haven't met Him yet; I think that we have to complete our journey to do that; but I can feel Him. It's incredible. It's like feeling all the good things, all the love and happiness you've ever experienced rolled into one and magnified to infinity. Words cannot describe it."

Their images started to fade. I reached out my hand but I couldn't touch them.

"Alexander. I have seen the spirits we call angels. They fly between the worlds on missions from Him. I can't help but feel this confirms our belief that their opposite number exists and crawl between worlds as well. Guard yourself well my friend since I am no longer there to do so. Pray for us and for yourself my friend for I feel that you have interesting times left before you. I've asked one of the angels to watch over you but she said that you already had a guardian angel. I wonder who that could be? Still, without me there you're sure to get into all sorts of trouble. Take care and don't get yourself killed before you've done what you were meant to do...whatever that may be.

"If I get a chance, I'll watch over you from here. I've got to go now. Remember, wherever

you go, my love and friendship always goes with you. May God bless you my friend. Goodbye."

And he faded away. There was so much I wanted to say. So much left unsaid over the years. Maybe that was why I had the dream. One last farewell.

Selina Dupree and I had the same "mother" but our supernatural abilities were vastly different. I have great strength and can stay in sunlight for brief periods of time. I personally like mirrors as I don't mind looking at my handsome self one little bit.

On the other side of the fence, Selina still has a scar from where sunlight once touched her ankle. Like all vampires, my sister is strong but I've only met one other vampire as strong as myself and he's permanently dead now (and good riddance). You really wouldn't think I was so strong to see me either. I am not skinny or anything, but neither am I particularly musclebound.

Selina prefers not go get too close to holy ground and has a tendency to become nauseated at the smell of garlic. To actually say she was repelled by the stuff as the popular mythos goes would be pushing her dislike too far. She also follows the Grandfather's edict on entering houses uninvited. On the sadder side, I don't know what Selina sees when she looks in mirrors but it's not pleasant and she's refused to talk about it for all these years. It's a shame because she's really a very good looking woman.

For myself, I find the smell of garlic distasteful. No "normal" foods smell good to me now. I've never met the Grandfather so could care less about his edicts and I still feel that God loves me even if I do sometimes kill someone who desperately needs killing. Perhaps I feel that God loves me

in part because I do occasionally kill those who need killing. Regardless, I enjoy visiting churches from time to time. Maybe now you understand why I'm not much on vampire traditions.

Still, there's one notable thing that Selina can do which I can't and that's change form. Like many vampires of our lineage, I can fly. However, unlike most I needn't change form into a bat or in a few rare cases a vaporous mist to do so, just as well since I can't do those changes at all. Changing form would probably be a nifty talent to have, I guess I just can't picture myself as an animal or something so vapid as mist. *C'est la vide.*

I awoke the second evening after Jack's death and my little tet-a-tet with the Brokenbones, or whatever that gang called itself, almost immediately after my dream of Jack and Aalice. And almost immediately found Selina's soulless friend, Miranda, sitting in my favorite lounge. This was yet another shock to my poor system. At this rate I was going to wind up an old man before my time.

Miranda was not particularly high up on my list of favorite people. You see Miranda is one of those soulless who actually seems to be soulless. Logic had replaced everything else except loyalty to Selina long before I met her. For long years now I've considered her a cold bitch and I'm not one of those people who nurse secret grudges. She knows exactly how I feel about her.

For her part Miranda feels that I'm a bad influence on Selina. When I'm around, we usually end up staying out late and having a drink or two without setting the intended up first or merely ordering from the local bloodbank (we *always* have friends at the bloodbanks). Miranda would plan out Selina's visits to the toilet if they were still necessary. In case you haven't figured it out yet we do not get along particularly well. So what the hell was she doing here?

Jack's final will. He'd sent it to Miranda. Good thing he was in heaven already or I would have killed him. Figuratively speaking of course.

Dallas by night was a rather pretty place with the varicolored lights and all. Like most large cities, it probably underwent an unfortunate transformation during the day, but with any luck I wouldn't have to see it then.

Less than twenty four hours after finding Miranda in my lounge saw us sitting in a rotating restaurant overlooking this large city. Miranda was eating supper and Selina and I were taking in the sights. I remained in mourning and Selina also wore black out of respect. She's always been a sympathetic person. Which was one of many reasons why I never quite understood why she and Miranda stayed together.

After a while, Miranda finished her meal and immediately got down to business. "Aside from his personal effects, all of which are left to you, Jack's will had nothing in it except for a financial portfolio. Everything is already in your name Mr. Wilde. You are a very wealthy man. Like everything else Jack did, he managed investments very well. You are, and have been for some years now, a multi-millionaire."

This didn't exactly come as a surprise. Jack's always said that we had funds enough to do practically anything we wanted. The homebody that I'd become wasn't terribly interested in doing anything. Hadn't been for quite some time now.

Maybe it was time for that to change.

Jack had been one of Miranda's favorite people. Probably because of his efficiency and competence when it came to doing anything and everything. Maybe, just maybe, somewhere in that heart of ice there was a spark of real caring that she kept alight for a few people. If that's true, then Jack had certainly been one of those people. But then again, I doubted there was anything in her heart but ice.

"I want Jack's armor, spurs, belt, shield, and sword. His body is to be cremated and I want the ashes delivered to me."

"Mr. Wilde," Miranda explained. "The police have not released those items at this time. I've arranged for the body to be released to a medical school in which you are a prime supporter. I am assured that from there things will be carried out as you've specified for Jack's remains. Your attorney is looking into the matter of Jack's knightly accouterments and he should have the definitive word within the week. Please understand: up to this point his main concern has been keeping you out of the investigation. However, if you simply cannot wait for the legal machinery to wind down, I would suggest that you hire a thief to steal Jack's belongings from the police station if you feel that strongly about the matter."

Selina took my hand. "Alex. You've got to start letting him go. I'm sure he's in a far better place now and he wouldn't want you obsessing over him like this."

I sat and thought about the dream I'd had the day before. "I'm sure you're right, Selina. He still deserves a fitting memorial and those items should be a part of it." I thought about how he'd been a part of my life for so many years. All I had left of him was in my head, in my heart, and whatever memorial I could make to him. My stubborn streak kicked into high gear as the saying goes. "Will be a part of it," I added with authority.

"If it means that much to you, then I'll get one of my people in Santa Fe to pay Cactus Ridge a visit. For one of us, raiding an evidence locker should be simply a matter of travel time."

"Thank you, dear sister," I said kissing her hand. "It means a lot to me."

"So. What are you going to do now Mister Wilde?" The bitch never would call me Alex. Just as well I supposed. That would probably annoy me just as much as her calling me Mister Wilde.

My lover and best friend were both dead. What would I do? I'd had two nights to think about it. "For starters, I'm going to buy a house. Then I think I'll see about living for a while instead of watching life pass me by."

The limo driver was one of Selina's younger family whom I believed had not been either driver or family too long ago. Miranda, joy of joys, rode up front with him. This was one of the few times I'd had a chance to talk with Selina without Little Miss Efficiency around.

Two nights had passed since our meeting in the restaurant. In the meantime, Miranda had rearranged my finances to suit my current needs. Skillfully, of course. Despite my eternal annoyance with her, she was good at what she did. All I'd had to do was sign a few forms and it was done. The bank, receding behind us, signaled the end of my old life and the beginning of another. I was having trouble deciding if I was happy, sad, or scared. Maybe all of the above and then some.

Selina chose that moment to kiss my cheek. When I looked a question at her, she just said, "You looked like you could use a kiss." She's always had impeccable timing.

"So?" I asked. "What is there to do in Dallas, Texas?" So far, no one I'd met here had the

outrageous accent that the Texans on television had but I figured that if I hung around long enough I'd find one who did. The limo driver didn't seem to have any noticeable accent at all other than American.

"There's a decent night club scene. It's not Paris, but what is?" You'll never guess where Selina was originally from.

"Any of our kind around? For that matter are there any packs in the area?" I'd run into a pack of werewolves in Toledo some years ago and had a rather nasty experience as a result. They might have gotten the worst of the deal but none of us had enjoyed the encounter and I'd rather not repeat the experience if I could avoid it.

"Packs? Oh, werewolves! There's a couple of small gangs but they're in the suburbs. Strictly small time and we keep a close eye on them to ensure that they remain so.

"Rest assured. The supernatural power in the D/FW metroplex is firmly in control of vampires. Of those vampires, about a third are under my influence. Not necessarily my control mind you, but I have influence all around this area. In case you've been under a rock since WWII," she paused and gave me an arch look that clearly stated she thought I had been. "Dallas is now known as the Tripartied City within our circles. Actually, it's the whole metroplex area including Arlington, Fort Worth, Denton and their satellite cities, but most people only know about Dallas." That was indeed news to me. Okay, so I've been under a rock the last few decades.

"I prefer to hang out at a delightful little club called NightWings. If you'd like, we can check it out? They even cater to our special needs. Ronaldo, the owner, even occasionally manages to get a bottle of blood wine. More than occasionally to be entirely truthful." She smiled a sly smile, "I see to it myself that he remains stocked as much as possible." She pressed the intercom button. "Angelo,

we're going to NightWings now. Thank you sweetheart."

Angelo. That's right. I'd heard the name mentioned before. But it was the other name, Ronaldo, that caught my attention. Ronaldo. When you live as long as I have, some names tend to have bad feelings associated with them. With me Ronaldo was definitely one of those names. Ronaldo was one of those people who had helped make WWII a really unpleasant experience for a lot of people.

I rode the rest of the way to NightWings in silence while Selina amiably chatted on about how Angelo was a new convert and other small things of no importance. Except on one of those few occasions when one of her dark moods was upon her, Selina was wonderful company. Even if you aren't. I suppose that's another reason why I liked her so much. I was pretty poor company during the ride I'm sure. Fighting off memories could be a tough job. Especially when the memories were less than pleasant to recall. By the time we arrived at NightWings, I found myself in a considerably better mood having successfully fought off memories of darker times and of loves and friends lost. As things turned out my earlier dark mood was for naught; I never even got a chance to see if it was the same Ronaldo.

The club was crowded and a bit noisy but I liked it nonetheless. The interior was a mixture of modern and old world architecture which I decided I approved of. I flashed Selina a smile and we waded in. I had no idea where Ms. Happiness went off to and I really didn't care. A band was

playing something jazzy and on our way to a table I whorled Selina into a few quick dance paces which sparked a delighted laugh from her before we continued on up the stairs to our balcony table.

Half a dozen of the club's current clientele were vampires. Maybe three or four soulless were also in attendance. I hadn't been around this many supernaturals in a long time. It felt kinda nice.

As the night progressed, we chatted and one by one all the other vampires came around to say 'hello' to Selina and to be introduced to me. She also quietly dabbled in one of her favorite hobbies: matchmaking. I sat and watched, amused by her cunning, subtlety, and downright deviousness. I noticed that all of the transforms in attendance were relatively new acquisitions. Not much old blood in America. However, I knew there were quite a few vampires in the country. While Selina and myself were part of a small group (most of the old blood seemed to prefer the old world), there were quite a few vampires who had passed two centuries in the country. There just didn't happen to be any here tonight.

Still, it was nice meeting new people... even if they were relatively new. Ours was a small and exclusive community. To be honest, most of the vampires I'd met in the last century had been older vampires. The younger folks here were more open and less guarded. I found it made for a pleasant change of pace. Of course, if they'd known Selina a bit better, maybe they would have been a bit more on guard against her favorite hobby (personally I've been guarding against it for quite some time now and do so mainly by reflex).

A waiter brought our drinks. I must admit to being startled. The drinks we were served were actually crystal goblets filled with blood. I was a bit shocked that the establishment would be so bold as to serve it in public; but then again I guessed the fear of inquisition or witch trial was outdated. I drank slowly to keep my eyes from turning red and kept close reign on my incisors. Selina didn't

bother to hide her fangs which jutted out over her lovely bottom lip. Times changed. Perhaps it was simply my survival instinct that made me uncomfortable about drinking blood in public. I didn't know why, but I did know that I was uncomfortable about doing so. Without a doubt, some old habits were hard to stop.

Miranda cleared her throat from right behind me and scared me half to death (so to speak). I haven't had someone sneak up on me in a long time and for just a moment a panic reflex nearly took over. The panic disappeared and in its place anger slid in. I lost control of my fangs and as my vision slipped into the infrared, the world took on the shade of reds, oranges, and yellows that also tell me my eyes have turned blood red.

I think I'll interject another note about my appearance here. When I become angry, hungry, or sometimes when I'm feeling romantically inclined, my upper incisors drop down another half inch and push their way forward and out just a little. Another effect is that my eyes turn red, during which time I can see into the infrared end of the spectrum. My ears do not become pointed and bat-like. My face does not become oddly contorted, at least no more than can be accounted by a normal, emotional response. I have seen a couple of vampires who do change almost completely when the hunger comes upon them. Mine and Selina's bloodline does not. Okay, end of note.

Miranda still stood there waiting for our attention, not quite looking smug and not quite looking innocent of intent. Selina patted me on the leg and with that I regained control. I caught a glimpse of the dark look she threw to Miranda. It had no discernable effect on her.

I looked around the club with my once again green eyes to see if anyone had noticed my loss of control. The music continued, people danced and talked on. If anyone did notice, they hid it well. Relief washed over me and I let out a breath I didn't remember taking. In a worse-case scenario, that

little slip could have potentially led to enough trouble that Selina might have had to quit one of her favorite retreats. For that matter the others I'd met that night could have met with similar problems. Not the sort of thing that would inspire people to remember me fondly. Of course, being the manipulator that Selina is, it was a most unlikely scenario but I've seen stranger things happen. I much preferred to be careful when I could.

Selina's dark look continued. "Miranda, that was foolish. You know what kind of a reaction that causes. It was an unnecessary risk. I'm surprised at you; putting me in harm's way... even as obliquely as that. It's not like you."

"In my estimation, regardless of Mister Wilde's reaction, you would be in no more danger than you are in now." For the first time, I noticed she was holding a submachine pistol under her jacket and watching the room continuously.

My own calm voice surprised me a bit. "Tell us what's happened, Sunshine."

She gave me a dark look but said, "Very well, Mr. Wilde. I'm afraid this will come as a shock to you, Selina. Please sit down." Looking worried, Selina sat. "A hunter has just killed Angelo. Presumably the hunter is still in the area. At this time, I am unable to ascertain whether or not the hunter is of supernatural origin or human."

I moved around and hugged Selina to me. She leaned her head against my chest but didn't cry.

Thoughts of Cactus Ridge passed through my head. Could it be that there had been a group of hunters instead of just the one? If that was the case, then the hunters had certainly lost no time tracking us down to NightWings. Then again, it could be that some local had figured out that NightWings was more than an average club. Whatever the case, I wasn't going to figure things out

in here.

Hmm. Another odd thing. Selina hadn't felt Angelo die. Therefore, she was not responsible for his supernatural condition. I'd gotten the impression that Angelo was of Selina's line. I briefly wondered if Angelo had been a Tassini and if Selina maintained her pact with them. However, that was not relevant to the current situation and I dismissed the thought.

Selina smiled a weak thanks my way and together we began heading towards the back of the club. There we were met by the vampires I'd met earlier and their armed soulless. Their expressions ranged from grim to furious. I planned on staying well away from the furious ones. Angry people tended to do stupid things that get the people around them killed.

Without a word Miranda, took the lead and we followed her down the back stairs and out the door into the rear parking lot. Someone had knocked out all the lights so it was pitch black.

Just the way I liked it.

There was a shimmer to my right and suddenly two of the vampires were now large wolves. The clicking of their toenails seemed loud for some reason.

We crossed the parking lot to where Selina's limo was parked. Next to it on the ground lay what was left of Angelo. He'd been staked out spreadeagle with four knives and there was a gaping hole in his bare chest where his heart should have been. His head lay on top of his belly.

I could hear someone getting sick behind me. One of the wolves, a bitch, began to howl. Behind me I heard Selina gently tell her to hush. A glimpse showed my sister rubbing the head of the upset wolf. Looking back to the body, I found myself a bit nauseous as well. It had been quite a while since I'd seen anything this gruesome except on television. I walked around the body looking things over.

The wound to the neck was clean. It appeared that the head had been taken off with a sword or an axe by someone who knew how to use it. The chest wound looked nasty. I leaned forward for a closer look. Umm. Someone had reached in and broken each rib over the heart by the expedient means of pulling it outward. It made for a horrific sight. The lack of blood suggested that Angelo had already been dead when the axe, stakes and fingers were used. I leaned over and moved his shirt collar away from the neck stump. There. One puncture hole on this half of his neck. I didn't bother with the head to see if there was a matching hole on it's neck stub. I knew there would be and my stomach was reaching the end of it's endurance.

A hand grabbed my shoulder and jerked me around. One of the vampires I'd met earlier, Donny I think his name was, was holding my arm. He had bloody tears running from his eyes but his face was a mask of fury. Evidently, he was a vampire whose bloodline transformed a bit when he became hungry or angry. "I thought you were one of us, man; not some kind of goddamn ghoul!"

Grabbing his forearms, I concentrated a moment. Sinking away his supernatural abilities wasn't difficult, he was young and not in particularly good control of his talents. His grip relaxed to that of a mortal, his fangs recessed back to normal, and his ears lost the slight point they'd gained when he'd triggered his transformation. He looked shocked and most of the others looked surprised.

"Believe me Donny - I'm not a ghoul." I released him and he took several steps away from me. "Angelo was killed by a Hunter, the real thing, not some mortal psychopath. He was killed before any of this happened, so he suffered very little. I shouldn't think the hunter is very far away yet." Donny transformed again and had a look of relief covered his face; presumably relief that he could still transform.

One of the wolves immediately began following a scent and the other immediately followed.

I saw a shimmering out of the corner of my eye and suddenly a pack of wolves was taking off after the other two. Four soulless ran after them at a tireless sprint. I stood there a moment thinking. I smelled a trap. Angelo's demise had been too carefully thought out. The severed head and heart, while grotesque, seemed just a little too calculated.

Quickly, I took off my jacket and pulled it inside out so that the black lining was all that showed. I'd be almost invisible against a dark background. That done I took to the skies.

Flying was one of my favorite activities in all the world. It is freedom and exhilaration and grace all rolled into one. I almost pity mortals and those supernaturals who cannot fly, who are chained to the ground by the bonds of gravity. They can fly only with the aid of cold machines. A shame that.

Flying slowly after them, I quickly spotted the pack. They were now led by a large black wolf. That would be Selina. The soulless followed at some distance. After about ten minutes of this, I noticed that the lot of them was rapidly approaching the river. I decided to fly on ahead and see what was to be seen. By now I was flying over the poorer side of town.

Hmm. Strange. You don't usually see three limos and two Ace Securities box vans in the poorer areas of town. Unless of course there was some kind of meeting of the druggies going on just now. Too much coincidence for me to believe.

Not only that but this whole neighborhood was dark. Not a single house or streetlight. And what was this? Strung between the streetlights was a thin mesh of some kind. Not easy to see with the naked eye and impossible to see with radar. The sort of netting zoologists used to capture bats. The whole block was a giant vampire trap. Interesting. I wondered who could have thought up something this elaborate. Time to find out.

If this was where the scent led, and I felt pretty sure it would be, Selina and the others would be here in a couple of minutes. Not much time. I flew around to the back door of one of the middle houses within the blacked out area. As the door was open, I flew on in. There, I found an elderly black couple duct-taped together in the center of the floor. Poor folks were probably scared half to death and uncomfortable as hell. In the front room crouched two black-clad men with nightvision equipment. Both had high-power crossbows and one of them had a camera like the one I'd seen on the voyeur outside Cactus Ridge. They'd either followed me or they were part of a national chain of hunters. Considering the alternative, I preferred to think they'd followed me.

Suddenly, I could see the heat radiating from their still unaware bodies. Two sharp points were pressing gently against my lower lip. Time to get down to business.

I grabbed the one with the camera by the scruff of the neck and whipped him around and through the window next to me. The crash was glorious. His friend had good reflexes. The crossbow came up and around in only a fraction of a second. Too bad for him he wasn't just a bit quicker. I batted his crossbow away, grabbed him by the front of his uniform and threw him out the other window. The old couple who's house I was wrecking were straining to see just what was going on. I took their twenty five inch color tv and left without a word. I'd see that they were paid back for their inconveniences later.

Before I stepped out the back door I shut my eyes so that any approaching hunters wouldn't see my eyes reflecting in the darkness. Blind, I took a few steps to get out from under the eaves of the house and flew up. After a long moment, I reopened my eyes. I'd flown higher than I'd intended. Too much adrenaline I supposed. Okay, maybe not actual adrenaline but this was no time to get technical. The pack was now only a half mile away from the edge of the trap area and closing fast.

Using every bit of my strength I could muster, I threw the tv. It flew in a beautiful arc until with a resounding crash and a bright flash, it hit the concrete right in front of the wolf pack. I must say, I've never seen wolves jump so high. I now considered them warned. Time to find out who the trapper was and finish this grim business.

As I was flying back to the limo, I saw several bullet riddled bodies behind one of the houses. They seemed to have their wrists and ankles duct-taped together. I could smell the blood from here. Things like that have a real way of making me angry. I had a quick flashback to the second world war. I'd been doing that a lot lately. I sternly suppressed both it and the anger. Time for paybacks later.

I flew the rest of the way over to the limos, avoiding the netting as I dropped lower. I couldn't see anyone in the limos but one of the security vans seemed to be a hotbed of activity. Quietly, I landed on top.

Almost immediately I heard a woman's voice drown out the other low conversations, "There's one of them near us! It's less than thirty feet away!" She was right about my proximity. But what did she mean by 'it'? Didn't she realize vampires were people too? To answer my own question, it appeared that she almost certainly did not think of us as people.

Folks dressed in black came rushing out of the van. Watching them, I noticed a detail I'd missed earlier. Each of them had a red cross fitchee emblazoned on their left shoulders. From here it looked like a blood covered dagger. The adopted symbol of the knights of St. George. A bastard organization that took St. George's dragon slaying to heart and sought out dragons of their own to slay. I'd personally never noticed a lot of resemblance between dragons and vampires, but then again I wasn't a fanatical nutcase either.

Last of all, out walked a woman who practically screamed supernatural to my heightened senses. It's not something you can see or smell exactly. It's more a certain presence that is felt. It's an odd sensation and hard to explain unless you've felt it.

And I was certainly feeling it now.

She began efficiently sending troops off into search patterns around the vicinity of the van. A scream ripped through the night. Not a vampire scream either. The woman muttered something that might have been a curse and stepped back into the van. Soon there'd be nobody out here but us vampires. A second and third scream in quick succession followed. The hunters seemed to be having a hard time of it. I flew down and into the van.

There was a man in the van as well as the woman. He seemed to be their communications officer. He sounded like he was trying to talk to several different people who were in deep trouble all at once. He looked quite surprised when I walked past the garlic bundles and the amassed religious icons that were scattered around the doorway. Almost as surprised as I looked when the woman gave him a punch to the jaw that sent him into dreamland.

Outside another scream mingled with a vampire's death scream to create a truly horrific sound. It wasn't Selina, thank God. Still, she was going to be terribly upset when all this was said and done. Automatic weapons chattered in the distance.

A katana sat on a counter behind her. It seemed likely that she was the one who'd killed Angelo. Without turning around, I closed the door behind me with my foot. The two of us stood there looking over and otherwise examining each other. She stood a bit shy of my own six foot height. With her red hair and light complexion she was more than pretty. She looked to be in good physical shape and she was a Hunter. No doubts about it. I thought I probably should have been

more worried. I wasn't, which pleased me in some vague way.

She spoke first. "I always thought a fifth degree elder vampire would be more formidable looking. More menacing." Fifth degree? Was there some sorta ranking system out there to determine vampires' relative strengths? I found out later that there actually was. How terribly strange.

"That's odd," I stated, feeling I ought to say something. "I always thought a real, supernatural Hunter would be breathing fire and running around in the full accouterments of a priest or priestess of Satan. You don't seem to be doing either."

"I have a delicate stomach and priests of Satan are fools by definition as anyone with half a brain could tell you. I am no fool. I worship the holy, not the unholy. But I'm not here to discuss religion with you. My name is Sasha Nikelovitch. You killed David and I'm going to make you pay for it." She began slowly walking towards me.

"David?" It took a second then it clicked, "Oh, yes. The Hunter in Cactus Ridge." There was a long pause during which my brain stopped working and I could see her becoming angry. Suddenly from out of nowhere fury rose up in me like a phoenix from ashes. She was giving off very little heat; little enough that if I'd had any doubts she was a transform they would have been dispelled. Sasha Nikelovitch stopped advancing. Indeed, she took a step back, uncertainty flaring bright within her. Her resolution firmed and she again stood her ground, back where she'd started.

I was breathing heavily. I'm still not sure why since I have no need to breath whatsoever. Still I was doing it. A disjointed, far away part of me noticed that I suddenly had claws now. Inch long things that I'd never had before. Not really sure what triggered that either. The urge to tear her to pieces was with my bare hands was strong, but I held it in check. Instead, using all my willpower,

I leaned against a console feigning casualness and began clicking my newfound claws against said console.

"Tell me about David Lee Smith, Miss Nikelovitch." It wasn't quite my normal voice but I was surprised by how close it was. I continued to click my new nails, one after the other, on the console.

Sasha looked nervous, defiant, and maybe just a touch worried all at once. "Dave Smith was my fiancé. His mortal assistants were on the trail of a nosferatu that was believed to be haunting Cactus Ridge. When he saw that the killer of miss Marion Flanders was one of the soulless, he was sure he'd managed to at last find his prey. He'd tracked the soulless down to your house and was moving in when that monster charged out and killed him. Without him there the police didn't know to look for you so you escaped justice. But only for a short time. Justice has found you and justice will be mine!"

"Marion?" That was all I could say. The console seemed to have suddenly become shredded. Curious that. After a long moment. "Why weren't you there? At the raid?"

It was her turn to have trouble speaking. "I'd gone out of town to get some bloodwine for our honeymoon. The poor, sweet idiot thought he could take you by himself in the daytime. He left a note. You were going to be his marriage gift to me." A single bloody tear ran down her cheek and a cold stab of fear flashed through me at just how close I had come to meeting a most unpleasant fate. However, the fear was gone almost as quickly as it had arrived. Now wasn't the time for fear or anything else that didn't keep one prepared for fighting.

Something else in the console went crunch. I ignored what my right hand seemed to be doing all on its own to the defenseless panel. For some reason I felt she deserved an explanation. With

some effort, I told her, "Marion and I were lovers. She didn't make it through the transformation. Jack didn't want to draw the wrong kind of attention to her death, so he made it look like murder."

She looked paler than before. "Oh." For a long moment afterwards she seemed speechless; then she took a step back and picked up the Japanese longsword. "There is still time to keep you from killing again." She began moving towards me.

I dropped down into a crouch. "I guess that leaves *me* to keep *you* from killing again, huh?"

She stalked forward with the sword raised high.

It may have just been my imagination but to me it seemed that all hope had left her eyes. "You know you can't kill me with a sword so why are you trying? Why throw away your life for nothing?" Actually, if she hit me in the heart or the head, there was a very good chance she *could* kill me. Personally I'd really rather not find out...besides, all things being equal, I preferred talking to fighting.

"Someone has to kill you. I've got the best chance of anyone around - and I think you *can* die by the sword." She took another careful step forward.

"Someone has to kill me? Why? I'm not some kind of unleashed killer like your knights of St. George. I don't act as judge, jury and executioner like they do. I deserve to die?" Actually, I do act as judge, jury, and executioner on occasion, but I wasn't going to let her know that or let it ruin a perfectly good speech. The circumstances under which the so-called knights and I killed were quite different. Bigotry had nothing to do with those whom I killed. The actions of those I killed were what led to their deaths. The knights killed those they felt might be a menace. Rumor had it they killed more humans than vampires. From the pile of corpses I'd seen behind the house, I didn't doubt

this in the least.

I let a tone of derisive disbelief creep into my voice. "How can you say that when you travel in the company of killers who murder in God's name and would kill you in a heartbeat if they knew you were a vampire, too? How do you justify *that*, Ms. Nikelovitch?"

"I am not a vampire! I feed on the blood of vampires but I'm not one of them. *I* don't feed on people as if they were cattle. *I* protect them from those who do! My people and I are a necessary good to cancel out the evil of vampires. Cancel them out forever if possible. All of them." A necessary good? What an interesting phrase.

The door behind me suddenly crashed open and two men with crossbows fired into the van. Pain ripped through my side and I fell back into one of the many electronic panels within the van. Wood. Nothing else hurt quite like it. I could feel the head of the bolt sticking out of my back. With a grunt of pain I pulled it the rest of the way through. Waves of nausea washed around me. I heard a similar sound of pain from the back of the van.

Two people, a man and a woman, entered the van. Both of them wore the black uniform of the knights of St. George. What a surprise. Evidently they thought I was no longer a threat. To tell the truth, I really didn't feel terribly threatening at the moment. I supposed it really had been a long time since I'd done any fighting.

"Albert, what's the meaning of this?" Sasha asked, holding a bloody crossbow bolt in one hand and her wounded thigh with the other. Blood was seeping out between her fingers and she looked paler than what I deemed was normal.

"The meaning of this dear Sasha, is that the knights of St. George don't appreciate being played patsy by scheming vampire bitches. Thought you could fool us did you? From the sound of

your conversation, maybe you even fooled yourself. In our book however, a vampire is a vampire is a vampire... and all vampires must die." Sasha looked shocked and I didn't think she was going to do anything to protect herself as Albert began raising his crossbow to her heart.

To tell you the truth I might have been happy to watch one of my enemies take care of another. I might have been but then again I wasn't sure that Sasha was really one of my enemies. She really sounded more confused than evil. Then there was the voice.

Two crossbowmen outside the van sat ready to shoot if their comrades inside needed them. Albert's companion had her crossbow pointed in my general direction and Albert was just aiming his crossbow at Sasha's heart when the voice, sounding like it was just behind me yet far, far away, called, "Alex, don't just sit there like an idiot. *Do* something."

Marion's voice came as such a surprise, I did just what I was told without thinking. I slapped the woman's crossbow away and kicked Albert in the arm. Without missing a beat the woman hit me in the nose with a forearm. It hurt but it got her much too close to me. I grabbed the front of her uniform and threw her sideways out the back of the van. She knocked both the crossbowmen down on her way out. I spun back around.

Albert was pale as a sheet and was holding what was clearly a broken arm. A look of pain tried and failed to dominate the hatred on his face. For her part Sasha was now pinned to the console behind her by the bolt that had hit her just above the collar bone. It looked painful but better there than a fatal shot to the heart.

Either Sasha was also unable to turn to mist or she'd forgotten how in the heat of the battle. I'd bet on the former. The whole mist thing seemed to be pretty rare.

I was reaching over to remove the bolt from her shoulder when she looked me in the eyes and

said in a cold, cold voice, "Don't you *dare* touch me." Now I don't really consider myself to be overly sensitive, but when I save someone's life I do expect some small measure of gratitude. My feelings somewhat ruffled, I turned and jumped out of the van.

The three knights were all unconscious. I could see four vampires walking down various streets from here. One of them was walking down from the front walk of the house that had the bodies behind it. She was wiping blood off her chin and looked from here to be extremely satisfied with herself. It looked like the trap had sprung all right.

From behind me Albert's voice said, "No evil crosses the knights of St. George and goes unslain." I spun around just in time to get hit in the chest by a crossbow bolt. For a moment I just stood there in shock. Sasha, a bloody tear marking her left shoulder, jumped up from behind Albert and sank her fangs into his neck. Then the shock faded and pain hit me like a tidal wave and the world was washed away.

Dreams. Images. Disjointed memories with nothing constant moving the chaos towards order. Nightmares and fantasies. Pain. When the dreams faded, the pain took control and whirled me into an infinity of agony. Then the pain would fade and the visions would again overtake me for an endless time.

I don't really remember a lot about those dreams now. Most of them remain just chaotic blurs in my memory. The last of the dreams I do remember. It had me firmly in the grip of someone dressed in white holding me above nothingness. The person's white gown turned into wings in the

odd way dreams have of changing without notice. Suddenly, there was a garden to one side of the nothingness that surrounded me and the winged person. Standing at the edge of the garden were Marion, Jack, and Alice. Jack and Alice were holding hands and Marion stood with her hands on her hips looking mildly annoyed.

"Silly boy," she scolded. "You should be more careful." Then a mischievous look cleared away the annoyed one. "Mmm. Could be what you've been looking for has finally found you, Alex." Her happy laughter rang like silver bells to my ears and my sadness at her death evaporated with their ringing. She was where she was meant to be and she was happy. That was all that really mattered.

Jack stood shaking his head. "I told you that you'd get into trouble without me. Marion's right: you really should be more careful. Our kind have to walk a tightrope in the living world. Try using a balancing staff until you manage to recuperate fully. You have been inactive for much too long my friend. But soon, your powers will come rushing back in full. In any event, getting back to my tightrope analogy, just you remember, 'you won't fall'. You won't fall because you're a good man and because I said so. And, if you do happen to fall, we'll be here to catch you." His look encompassed the three on the ledge as well as the winged person holding me. When I turned to look and see my benefactor's face, I woke up.

There was no slow transition to consciousness. I went from the dream into the waking world so fast I was totally lost for a long moment. A variety of sensations caught up with me all at about

the same time.

I was sitting up with what felt like a mound of pillows behind my back. My chest ached and itched at the same time. The sweet, metallic aftertaste of blood was in my mouth. I felt weak as a kitten. Miranda and Sasha were sitting in chairs at the end of my bed. Selina stood next to me with a gold cup that I knew from past times had been made in Alexandria long, long ago. I was alive. Well...so to speak anyway. I felt horrible. And I was still around to feel this dreadful and that felt glorious!

"Well. I'm glad you decided to stay on this side a while longer. I'm glad I can finally return the favor of saving you as you've done for me so many times. I must admit you had me worried there for a while, my dear brother." Selina squeezed my hand and took a seat next to the bed. "Fortunately for all of us involved..." she paused to give Sasha a significant look, "...fortunately the crossbow bolt that hit you only grazed your heart. A half inch more and we'd be having two more funerals to attend." Another look at the somewhat paler Sasha. "But that's enough of the morbid and sentimental. On to business." Selina? Getting down to business so quickly? Something was up.

She continued, "I'm in a bit of a quandary now thanks to you and Sasha, Alex. You see Angelo was my friend and a very good friend of one the family heads around these parts. Very good friends." Around these parts? Just how long had Selina been living in Texas? "By rights I should turn Sasha over to them and let them dispense justice as they see fit." Sasha looked justifiably uncomfortable at this idea. "You, Alex, are the one who saved her, thereby causing this trouble. So, you should by rights go with her." Selina was up to something tricky, I could smell it. For just a moment the near-smile left her face and she turned wholly serious. "You are both equally responsible for bringing the attention of the Knights of St. George down on my little town. This is going to cause

me and mine no end of trouble." The near-smile came back. The knights were something Selina could deal with in her sleep and we both knew it.

"However, I've had a long talk with Sasha while we were tending you." We? Tending *moi*? I distinctly remembered Sasha telling me in a voice that could be warmed by the arctic winds not to touch her; not even to pull out a crossbow bolt. She'd been tending me? Just how long had I been unconscious and just what was going on here? "Alex," the woman I thought of as my sister continued. "It seems to me that there are some mitigating circumstances in Sasha's case. As for you, you did warn us of the trap, and I must confess to some fondness for the welfare of your miserable carcass." She patted me on the knee. Miserable carcass? She'd definitely been in Texas too long.

Miranda stood up and left the room.

Selina was now smiling her clever-vixen-with-chicken-feathers-around-the-mouth smile. I hadn't been really worried earlier. I was now.

"The two of you are both without protectors. Jack Cosgrove and David Smith having killed each other in that gross misunderstanding back in New Mexico. You're both rather unpopular around here...or you would be if certain versions of the truth were known." Was that the hint of a threat? While I knew she wouldn't carry out any threat against me, still, my bad feeling continued to grow worse.

"With all the preceding as fact I've decided that the only thing left to do other than turning you two over for the questionable justice of my fellow Tripartite rule, Grace Canstanella, is...." She stood up and walked around behind Sasha who had begun to look distinctly nervous. I thought I might have looked similarly nervous. Well, maybe not nervous. Wary. That was a it. Wary.

The door opened and Miranda came back in carrying a small, ornately carved box. She was

followed by ten vampires all decked out in their finest. It may have been my imagination but I could have sworn I heard Marion say, "Oh, goody, goody, goody. I just love this part." This did nothing to curtail my... wariness. Whatever happened to the good ol' days when the dead stayed dead?

"Ah, Miranda, honored guests. You're right on time." Turning back to us. "What I've decided to do is bind the two of you together in the bonds of holy matrimony. This marriage will symbolize the beginning of your new life and will absolve you of all crimes committed before you're union. Such is the grandfather's wisdom."

Miranda opened the box revealing matching gold rings. While Sasha jumped up and argued, I sat back and thought about this (as if I was strong enough to do anything else). Unless the grandfather of vampiredom had issued an odd, new decree while I was out of touch, which was unlikely in the extreme because Jack had always had a way of hearing these things, Selina was making this up. Sasha continued arguing heatedly while Selina looked more and more like a cat with a cornered mouse. The guests appeared amused. I was looking for a good point at which to introduce my own objection as well as my lack of faith in the existence of the grandfather's latest supposed edict when Miranda stepped over and handed me a letter. She almost looked smug.

With a sinking feeling I quickly glance down to the bottom of the page. The letter was signed 'Aristol Pangellos'. None other than the infamous (among the supernatural, anyway) grandfather of vampiredom. It almost certainly had to be real. No one alive or dead would dare forge that signature unless they were monumentally foolish or ignorant. The grandfather had a way of making sure that everyone associated with any transgression against him and his office were dealt with and dealt with in a most unpleasant manner. I quickly scanned the letter. Then I slowly read the letter. Then I re-read the letter. At which time Miranda took it away from my numb hand and showed it to Sasha.

The room grew very quiet except for some very loud smiles.

According to the letter, Pangellos agreed with Selina's idea (the letter didn't go into detail about just what her whole, bright idea had been) and wrote out a decree that the two of us were pardoned of crimes that occurred before our wedding. It went on to say that we were married as of the signing of the letter. The letter was dated August 4: three days after my meeting with the knights, according to the electronic calendar I'd just noticed on the wall that was two days ago. As far as the rest of the supernatural world was concerned Sasha and I had been married for two days now.

Oh, crap.

Aminnor, Georgia (the North American Georgia that is) is a rather nice place. Technically speaking, it's out in the boonies. By helicopter it's only about an hour's trip to Atlanta. Civilization without all the crap that goes with it. Kinda nice really.

Sasha has just purchased a slightly decrepit mansion a few miles outside of town. The place had some nicely wooded land, ponds, and lots of pastureland for horses. Lots. I believe I overheard the word 'thousands' in combination with the word 'acres'. Strike one bank account. If I understood the remodeling plans correctly, I might as well put down another as dead. Not that this left us in anything less than wonderful financial shape mind you. Still, after hoarding money for years and years, old habits are hard to break. Hmm. Realistically speaking it looks more like that old habit shattered rather than broke. *C'est la vide.*

Sasha and I are getting along a little better now than we were the first couple of days after we received the rings. At that time, she seemed to blame me for the whole predicament. Well, it was probably safer than blaming Selina Dupree in her place of power. Selina has something of a temper when aroused and evidently Sasha had already done that. Once and only once apparently. Blaming me didn't seem terribly fair to the near helpless me mind you, but it was safe. To be honest, I didn't mind Sasha railing at me nearly so much as Selina's gloating smile. I believe she counted this one of the high points of her matchmaking career despite the fact that it made Ivan the Terrible appear to be light-handed by comparison. Cheating bitch.

Anyway, back to the relationship between myself and my wife. My wife. How strange the sound of this simple word as it rolls off my tongue. Wife. The word and the implications it brings will take a great deal of getting used to. On both our parts.

It seemed to me that shopping has taken some of the sting out of the whole, odd affair - for Sasha, anyway. She dutifully takes me with her (even on the daytime trips) whenever she buys something significant. Such as the limo and Astin Martin. Or the aforementioned helicopter. Or the yacht and berth down in the Florida Keys. Or the island. No, that one's still too sensitive. Don't want to talk about the island just yet.

All in all that would seem to me to be enough sting removal for just about anything. And like I said, we're getting along better, but not well enough to actually be considered friends in my book. Sometimes, I think I can hear the recently dead giggling. I'm not really sure it's just my imagination. As Jack had mentioned in my fever dream, my powers were returning quickly to what they once were. And more. Perhaps hearing the dead would be a new addition. It would certainly be interesting to find out.

Part of the problem has been Sasha adjusting to the idea that being a Hunter means that she's still a vampire. She had been taught that hunters were a class above vampire. That hunters were blessed by God with the sacred duty to destroy vampires. Further, they'd taught her that vampires were not truly people but were instead unholy abominations that used their wiles to randomly kill and to destroy people's lives. While she had begun to doubt parts of this, she had not decided if the whole of the message was truly flawed. Now that she'd spent time around vampires, she knew how deep the lies truly went. She's adjusting pretty well given the short amount of time we'll have. I'll just try to exercise patience and not strangle her (as if it would do any good anyway). Perhaps the biggest problem is still the loved ones that we've both recently lost. Of course, I've noticed that it's easier to let go of someone you still hear giggling now and again. Next time I see my friend, Ahrmin, I'll have to ask him for a more reliable means of communicating with the dead.

I am slowly adjusting to life without Jack. Jack had ties at all the blood banks within two hundred miles of our home, regardless of where home ended up being. We received regular deliveries and I never had to go out to dine when I didn't want to. Here in Georgia, I've started setting up my first contacts and I've started experimenting with animal blood. The horsefarm idea may yet turn out alright. Time will tell. This totally skips over the real loss I feel, but I'm not ready to share that yet.

For right now I've got an idea I'm going to try on how to further break the ice with Sasha. With my wife.

It begins with a single blood red rose and an invitation to dinner.