

The Disappearing Road

“You look unhappy,” Veronica said by way of greeting to her husband, Jeff. “Bad news or just a bad start to the night?” They’d only gotten back into town shortly before sunrise. A rather dicey move for a pair of vampires but they’d agreed the risk was minimal and they had both wanted to get back home last night after being out of town for so long.

Three hours into the following evening found her husband sitting with his back to one of their living room walls. And Jeff Daniels did indeed look unhappy. “I went to see Kristoff. He’s not doing so well and I don’t simply mean the old injuries and scars. He didn’t come out and say it, but I think he’s beginning to consider going around the Lady Selina’s order that he not deal with the doppelgangers in Atlanta.”

“If he’s actually thinking about going against her wishes... he must be getting desperate,” she mused aloud, taking a seat in a nearby chair. “We knew his injuries weighed heavily on him. But for him to actually think about going against *her* orders. It’s unprecedented. Any idea what might have brought this on?”

“Besides the fact that it’s taken us over *nine* years and we haven’t been able to find a *single* bloody doppelganger?” he asked sharply. Taking a deep breath, he told her in a more normal voice, “I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean to bark at you. You didn’t deserve that. I’m just frustrated by our continuing failure of our search, all the limitations that have been placed on said search, and I’m now concerned about Kristoff’s state of mind on top of it all. And to actually answer your question: no. I don’t know what brought on this sudden desperation on his part.”

“I understand,” she told him quietly, gliding over to sit next to him on the floor. She placed a comforting hand on his knee and they sat in silence for a long while.

“Why would the Lady Selina put all these limitations on us and Kristoff?” he eventually asked, shaking his head obviously perplexed. “It just doesn’t make any sense. We know there are doppelgangers in Atlanta. Why can we not simply ask one of them for the blood we need? Kristoff’s one of her lords for pity’s sake. A member of her court’s nobility. Why is she insisting that we find an alternative source for the blood that could cure his burns and other injuries? I don’t believe for a minute the rumor that’s been floating around about the doppelgangers of Atlanta having some sort of plague or curse. In nine years she should have been able to find the veracity of that particular rumor. For that matter she probably could have verified it one way or another in nine minutes. If she didn’t make up the rumor herself to start with.”

“We’ve been over this before, Jeff,” she answered quietly. “I don’t believe it either. But her command stands and as we live in her realm, we are bound to abide by what she says. Or pay a higher price than either of us can afford. Even if there wasn’t the plague or curse rumor, there’s the whole other dimension she’s added concerning Atlanta. For some reason the Lady Selina’s made it most plain to everyone within her considerable realm of influence, that having contact with anyone in Atlanta is treason. And that’s despite the rumors that her brother helped set in place the current vampire representatives to the Atlanta council of eight. Or, I suppose to be fair, it could be because of it... assuming *that* particular rumor should turn out to be true, of course. Regardless, we cannot afford to draw her wrath. As much as I love Kristoff, I won’t risk becoming a decoration on Selina’s wall for the next decade as an example to others who might ponder going against her will. Nor could I stand to see you dealt with in such a fashion. It’s probably just some damnable side effect of

vampire politics. The eternal bane of vampires everywhere.” Jeff nodded resignedly.

“What about Houston,” he asked after a little while. “It’s a big place. Surely there must be doppelgangers there?”

“Houston’s a most peculiar place,” she mused, considering the thought as though they hadn’t had a dozen similar such conversations in the course of the last nine years. “The Seven Masters are paranoid about having any outside supernaturals enter into their domain. I rather suspect that if there were any doppelgangers to be found there, that they’d have hidden themselves so well we’d never find them.” She was quiet a moment, “I hate to say it but I think our best bet is going to be to go back to the maps and trying to find that colony that de Vartis mentioned.”

“Ah yes,” he stated with a frown, covering his face with his hands. “The rumored colony founded some two hundred odd years ago by doppelgangers freshly arrived in the new world. The very colony we’ve been searching fruitlessly for over the span of the last nine years and across all the gulf coast states. I am very rapidly starting to think that our colony packed their collective bags some time long past and moved. Or they all died.” Taking his hands away from his face, he stared unseeingly up at the ceiling.

“Don’t give up hope yet,” she said, leaning against him. “There’s a flip side to not hearing about this doppelganger colony. Doppelgangers are supernaturals. I have yet to meet a supernatural that was easy to kill. And just as de Vartis heard about the colony shortly after it’s arrival, I think someone would have heard about them had they moved. It’s just a shame that de Vartis couldn’t remember who he heard the doppelganger story from in the first place. That it was on or near the American coast of the Gulf of Mexico hasn’t really narrowed down the search all that much.”

“You are a veritable master of understatement, dear,” Jeff informed her, leaning his head atop hers.

“What about some of the other major cities?” he asked after a long moment. “New York, Los Angeles, Chicago? Surely as large as they are, there must be doppelgangers there somewhere.”

“Probably,” she sighed, “But the underside of those cities isn’t as organized or as... bound by the rule of law... as we are here or Atlanta is rumored to be. Vampires do run those cities but they only consider other vampires and their servants as people. Unfortunately, the other supernatural races do not fare so well in those environments. It’s the same old story of what happens when the *soaked* take control of a place. Trying to find a doppelganger or a werewolf or any other supernatural would be ten times as difficult as what we’re doing. I’ve heard rumors...”

“What sort of rumors, sweetheart?” he asked quietly.

“Rumors of hunting parties looking for the blood of other supernaturals,” she whispered sadly. “Rumors of supernaturals kept in boxes to be periodically bled. Rumors of dark, bloody happenings at shadowy gatherings. No. The north and the westcoast undercities are not the place for us. Or for a smart doppelganger, either.”

“What a waste,” Jeff said quietly. “All of eternity and the only thing some people can think about is themselves and sating their dark desires. It makes me want to cry for our people. And makes me wonder if we’re ever going to find a doppelganger who’s willing to work with us.” They sat in the dark room in a comfortable silence for a while.

“Well, Vera brought over another box of old maps and things,” she stated, trying to sound enthusiastic and falling far short. “I suppose looking them over is better than doing nothing.”

Jeff made a noise which she took to be a similar lack of fervor on his part. After sitting for a while longer, Jeff asked, “By the way, do you know de Vartis’ first name? I don’t think I’ve ever actually heard it.”

“Pinckney,” she replied quietly.

“Hmm. In his shoes, I think I’d stick with ‘de Vartis’ as well.”

“Yep.”

Jeff sighed and said, “I suppose we should check out what Vera brought.”

“Yeah,” she agreed with matching enthusiasm. “Let’s see what treasures from the past she’s unearthed for us.” Standing, she pulled her husband up after her. “Let’s hope it’s not Texas again. I love it here but we’ve been up and down the coast enough that I’m sure they’re not here. At least not in the areas away from Houston’s control.”

“I am in complete and total agreement with you. For that matter, I’d just as soon rule out the Florida peninsula as well,” he told her as they walked into their den. On a low set coffee table sat a box.

“Sounds good to me,” she agreed, looking into the open top of the box. “Hmm. Road maps, regional maps, survey maps... maps, maps, and more maps. Where would you like to start?” she asked.

“I think I’ll try one of the maps,” he replied with a wry little grin.

“Imagine that,” she muttered, cutting him a grin of her own. “Well, pick a state and I’ll start on another.”

“Here we go again,” he grouched good-naturedly, digging into the box. A few minutes later found the two of them engrossed in searching over maps. Occasionally, one of them would ask the other if they’d investigated a place in one of their previous searches, but other than the occasional question, the house remained quiet except for the occasional sound of papers rustling together for the next couple of hours.

“Sweetheart?” Jeff asked distractedly. “Did we ever go through Woodbluff? The name sounds vaguely familiar for some reason.”

“Hmm?” she asked, looking at his map to see what he was talking about, “Ah. Woodbluff. I think so. Isn’t that the town where we bought Alan and Pam that painting of the sunset?”

“Yes,” he agreed with a smile. “That’s it. I knew it sounded familiar. Mmm. Isn’t that odd?”

“No,” she replied distractedly, already pouring over her own maps again, “Nothing odd about it. It was a nice painting and was rather traditional in the artistry. Good frame, too.”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about. Veronica, look at this,” he said, handing her the map.

“Right. It’s Woodbluff. A nice, quiet town full of nice, quiet humans. Out in the middle of nowhere to be sure but so are a lot of small towns.” She glanced up to find him rapidly sorting through a stack of maps he’d already gone through.

“Look at the road leading south out of Woodbluff. What do you see?” he asked, opening another map.

“There is no road to the south out of Woodbluff,” she told him, looking a bit perplexed.

“Exactly,” he declared with a hint of excitement in his voice. “Now, the map you’re looking at is dated 1953. Check out this map dated 1946.” he said, setting it into her lap. “Do you see it?”

“There was a road,” she muttered, “Running south out of Woodbluff. It ran all the way to this little seaside town. And that town’s not shown on the ‘53 map either. What about more recent maps?”

“This is a current map,” he informed her, setting another map on top of the first two. “It shows both the road south and the little seaside town. It also shows this small road coming out of the mysterious seaside town which runs along the coast for a ways before turning northeast where

it runs into this other little road.... here. We haven't checked out this seaside town at all."

"Wait a minute," she said, closing her eyes. "Let's not get too excited. This could just be an oversight on the mapmaker's part."

"Could be," he agreed neutrally.

"I remember our drive through Woodbluff. There were no signs indicating that another town lay to the south. Nor were there any signs that marked this road as being anything other than a local, residential road," she said, opening her eyes.

"Approach our mysterious little seaside town from the other side," he said confidently. "And I'd almost be willing to bet there are no signs here either mentioning the town. Probably nothing marking either the road or the town that lay at the end of it. I won't say we've found it..."

"But it's the best lead we've had," she finished. "If this pans out, we need to send Vera a thank you gift."

"Agreed," he grinned, "On both counts. When do we leave?"

"Hmm," she mused for a long moment. "Let's give ourselves a few nights. I need to get some more film for my photographer disguise. And I'd like to rest a little before dashing back out onto the road. How are you set up for your journalistic stuff?"

"I'm fine. I suppose I could go ahead and get a few new micro-cassettes and pre-fill a couple of them... just in case someone decides to nose through our stuff."

"That's a good idea," she agreed. "I think I'll do the same with a few rolls of film. Shoot some trees and other generic stuff that could be from anywhere. While we're in town, we need to get the oil changed on the clunker. It's way overdue."

"Yeah," he said sadly. "I suppose the van does go with the disguise. Traveling dark room that it is and all that. Why don't we ever go disguised as jetsetting millionaires?"

"Because everyone expects millionaires to be stuck-up snobs and they project that persona upon them. That or they want to borrow money or get a loan or they have a great investment opportunity. Basically, millionaires do not have a low profile and they would not get the answers we'd need. Or provide the opportunity required for purchasing the blood Kristoff needs."

He sighed again, "I know. Still, I bet we could fake it pretty well."

"Probably," she agreed, "But we're not going to take any risks with this. Any guesses as to just how many dopplegangers we're likely to run into if this really is the place?"

"Not a clue," he replied, setting the stacks of maps back into the box. "If I had to guess... maybe a hundred. Probably less. According to the size of the town indicated on the map, that little place couldn't support many more than that and keep it a secret. At least, I wouldn't think so. To be perfectly honest though, I don't know much at all about dopplegangers. You?"

"No," she frowned. "I don't. They're pretty rare in the new world."

"As I recall," he said, turning back towards her. "The old world wasn't exactly bursting at the seams with them either."

"No," she agreed, "It wasn't. As I understand it, sometime well before I was born, there was a big purge. Dopplegangers assassinated someone important or perhaps several someones and the vampires of the day responded with a bloody massacre. Rumor was that the dopplegangers lost ten percent of their overall population in less than three months. A true decimation."

"Let's hope that these dopplegangers don't remember that... or try to hold us accountable if they do."

"Yes. Let us hope. And make a plan or two just in case," she suggested as they walked to the kitchen.

“It’s always good to have a contingency plan. Or two. Any idea what the life expectancy of a doppelganger might be?” Jeff asked, opening the refrigerator. “Hey, Vera dropped us off a dozen pints of fresh blood. Regardless of whether the lead pans out or not, we need to get her something nice.”

“I quite agree.” She proceeded to pull out a large ceramic dish out and fill it with water before setting it on the stove. She turned the heat up as Jeff set a pair of plastic blood packets to be warmed next to the stove and pulled down a pair of large, empty brandy snifters. “And to answer your question, I have no clue how long doppelgangers live. Maybe we can find out.”

“Oh, well,” he said, sitting down in one of the kitchen chairs and pulling his wife across to sit in his lap. “We’re good a winging it, you and I. We’ll do just fine,” he paused a moment to nibble at her ear.

“Hold that thought,” she told him. “I’ve got a serious question: Do we tell Kristoff? If we do, we might give him hope and prevent him from doing something rash. If we don’t...”

“Then we run the risk of him doing something stupid,” he stared at nothing out the kitchen window for a long moment. “Additionally, if we tell him and it doesn’t pan out, then the disappointment might cause worse problems than not telling him... Let’s not make a decision tonight. Let’s make our preparations, have dinner with Kristoff, maybe an evening or two if we can arrange it, and then see what our instincts tell us.”

“That’s a good idea, lover. Now,” she grinned, presenting her ear, “Back to your other good idea.”

“Welcome home, Mrs. Daniels,” he whispered kissing his way across her neck.

“Welcome home, Mister Daniels,” she replied with a contented sigh.