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WILLIE MCCOY HAD been a jerk before he died. His being dead didn't change that. He sat across from me, wearing a loud plaid sport jacket. The polyester pants were primary Crayola green. His short, black hair was slicked back from a thin, triangular face. He had always reminded me of a bit player in a gangster movie. The kind that sells information, runs errands, and is expendable.

Of course now that Willie was a vampire, the expendable part didn't count anymore. But he was still selling information and running errands. No, death hadn't changed him much. But just in case, I avoided looking directly into his eyes. It was standard policy for dealing with vampires. He was a slime bucket, but now he was an undead slime bucket. It was a new category for me.

We sat in the quiet air-conditioned hush of my office. The powder blue walls, which Bert, my boss, thought would be soothing, made the room feel cold.

"Mind if I smoke?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "I do."

"Damn, you aren't gonna make this easy, are you?"

I looked directly at him for a moment. His eyes were still brown. He caught me looking, and I looked down at my desk.

Willie laughed, a wheezing snicker of a sound. The laugh hadn't changed. "Geez, I love it. You're afraid of me."

"Not afraid, just cautious."

"You don't have to admit it. I can smell the fear on you, almost like something touching my face, my brain. You're afraid of me, 'cause I'm a vampire."

I shrugged; what could I say? How do you lie to someone who can smell your fear? "Why are you here, Willie?"

"Geez, I wish I had a smoke." The skin began to jump at the corner of his mouth.

"I didn't think vampires had nervous twitches."

His hand went up, almost touched it. He smiled, flashing fangs. "Some things don't change."

I wanted to ask him, what does change? How does it feel to be dead? I knew other vampires, but Willie was the first I had known before and after death. It was a peculiar feeling. "What do you want?"

"Hey, I'm here to give you money. To become a client."

I glanced up at him, avoiding his eyes. His tie tack caught the overhead lights. Real gold. Willie had never had anything like that before. He was doing all right for a dead man. "I raise the dead for a living, no pun intended. Why would a vampire need a zombie raised?"

He shook his head, two quick jerks to either side. "No, no voodoo stuff. I wanna hire you to investigate some murderers."

"I am not a private investigator."

"But you got one of 'em on retainer to your outfit."

I nodded. "You could just hire Ms. Sims directly. You don't have to go through me for that."

Again that jerky head shake. "But she don't know about vampires the way you do."

I sighed. "Can we cut to the chase here, Willie? I have to leave"—I glanced at the wall clock—"in fifteen minutes. I don't like to leave a client waiting alone in a cemetery. They tend to get jumpy."

He laughed. I found the snickery laugh comforting, even with the fangs. Surely vampires should have rich, melodious laughs. "I'll bet they do. I'll just

bet they do.” His face sobered suddenly, as if a hand had wiped his laughter away.

I felt fear like a jerk in the pit of my stomach. Vampires could change movements like clicking a switch. If he could do that, what else could he do?

“You know about the vampires that are getting wasted over in the District?”

He made it a question, so I answered. “I’m familiar with them.” Four vampires had been slaughtered in the new vampire club district. Their hearts had been torn out, their heads cut off.

“You still working with the cops?”

“I am still on retainer with the new task force.”

He laughed again. “Yeah, the spook squad. Underbudgeted and undermanned, right.”

“You’ve described most of the police work in this town.”

“Maybe, but the cops feel like you do, Anita. What’s one more dead vampire? New laws don’t change that.”

It had only been two years since Addison v. Clark. The court case gave us a revised version of what life was, and what death wasn’t. Vampirism was legal in the good ol’ U.S. of A. We were one of the few countries to acknowledge them. The immigration people were having fits trying to keep foreign vampires from immigrating in, well, flocks.

All sorts of questions were being fought out in court. Did heirs have to give back their inheritance? Were you widowed if your spouse became undead? Was it murder to slay a vampire? There was even a movement to give them the vote. Times were a-changing.

I stared at the vampire in front of me and shrugged. Did I really believe, what was one more dead vampire? Maybe. “If you believe I feel that way, why come to me at all?”

“Because you’re the best at what you do. We need the best.”

It was the first time he had said “we.” “Who are you working for, Willie?”

He smiled then, a close secretive smile, like he knew something I should know. “Never you mind that. Money’s real good. We want somebody who knows the night life to be looking into these murders.”

"I've seen the bodies, Willie. I gave my opinions to the police."

"What'd you think?" He leaned forward in the chair, small hands flat on my desk. His fingernails were pale, almost white, bloodless.

"I gave a full report to the police." I stared up at him, almost looking him in the eye.

"Won't even give me that, will ya?"

"I am not at liberty to discuss police business with you."

"I told 'em you wouldn't go for this."

"Go for what? You haven't told me a damn thing."

"We want you to investigate the vampire killings, find out who's, or what's, doing it. We'll pay you three times your normal fee."

I shook my head. That explained why Bert, the greedy son of a gun, had set up this meeting. He knew how I felt about vampires, but my contract forced me to at least meet with any client that had given Bert a retainer. My boss would do anything for money. Problem was he thought I should, too. Bert and I would be having a "talk" very soon.

I stood. "The police are looking into it. I am already giving them all the help I can. In a way I am already working on the case. Save your money."

He sat staring up at me, very still. It was not that lifeless immobility of the long dead, but it was a shadow of it.

Fear ran up my spine and into my throat. I fought an urge to draw my crucifix out of my shirt and drive him from my office. Somehow throwing a client out using a holy item seemed less than professional. So I just stood there, waiting for him to move.

"Why won't you help us?"

"I have clients to meet, Willie. I'm sorry that I can't help you."

"Won't help, you mean."

I nodded. "Have it your way." I walked around the desk to show him to the door.

He moved with a liquid quickness that Willie had never had, but I saw him move and was one step back from his reaching hand. "I'm not just another pretty face to fall for mind tricks."

"You saw me move."

“I heard you move. You’re the new dead, Willie. Vampire or not, you’ve got a lot to learn.”

He was frowning at me, hand still half-extended towards me. “Maybe, but no human could a stepped outta reach like that.” He stepped up close to me, plaid jacket nearly brushing against me. Pressed together like that, we were nearly the same height—short. His eyes were on a perfect level with mine. I stared as hard as I could at his shoulder.

It took everything I had not to step back from him. But dammit, undead or not, he was Willie McCoy. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction.

He said, “You ain’t human, any more than I am.”

I moved to open the door. I hadn’t stepped away from him. I had stepped away to open the door. I tried convincing the sweat along my spine that there was a difference. The cold feeling in my stomach wasn’t fooled either.

“I really have to be going now. Thank you for thinking of Animators, Inc.” I gave him my best professional smile, empty of meaning as a light bulb, but dazzling.

He paused in the open doorway. “Why won’t you work for us? I gotta tell ’em something when I go back.”

I wasn’t sure, but there was something like fear in his voice. Would he get in trouble for failing? I felt sorry for him and knew it was stupid. He was the undead, for heaven’s sake, but he stood looking at me, and he was still Willie, with his funny coats and small nervous hands.

“Tell them, whoever they are, that I don’t work for vampires.”

“A firm rule?” Again he made it sound like a question.

“Concrete.”

There was a flash of something on his face, the old Willie peeking through. It was almost pity. “I wish you hadn’t said that, Anita. These people don’t like anybody telling ’em no.”

“I think you’ve overstayed your welcome. I don’t like to be threatened.”

“It ain’t a threat, Anita. It’s the truth.” He straightened his tie, fondling the new gold tie tack, squared his thin shoulders and walked out.

I closed the door behind him and leaned against it. My knees felt weak. But there wasn’t time for me to sit here and shake. Mrs. Grundick was prob-

ably already at the cemetery. She would be standing there with her little black purse and her grown sons, waiting for me to raise her husband from the dead. There was a mystery of two very different wills. It was either years of court costs and arguments, or raise Albert Grundick from the dead and ask.

Everything I needed was in my car, even the chickens. I drew the silver crucifix free of my blouse and let it hang in full view. I have several guns, and I know how to use them. I keep a 9 mm Browning Hi-Power in my desk. The gun weighed a little over two pounds, silver-plated bullets and all. Silver won't kill a vampire, but it can discourage them. It forces them to have to heal the wounds, almost human slow. I wiped my sweaty palms on my skirt and went out.

Craig, our night secretary, was typing furiously at the computer keyboard. His eyes widened as I walked over the thick carpeting. Maybe it was the cross swinging on its long chain. Maybe it was the shoulder rig tight across my back, and the gun out in plain sight. He didn't mention either. Smart man.

I put my nice little corduroy jacket over it all. The jacket didn't lie flat over the gun, but that was okay. I doubted the Grundicks and their lawyers would notice.

2

I HAD GOTTEN to see the sun rise as I drove home that morning. I hate sunrises. They mean I've overscheduled myself and worked all bloody night. St. Louis has more trees edging its highways than any other city I have driven through. I could almost admit the trees looked nice in the first light of dawn, almost. My apartment always looks depressingly white and cheerful in morning sunlight. The walls are the same vanilla ice cream white as every apartment I've ever seen. The carpeting is a nice shade of grey, preferable to that dog poop brown that is more common.

The apartment is a roomy one-bedroom. I am told it has a nice view of the park next door. You couldn't prove it by me. If I had my choice, there would be no windows. I get by with heavy drapes that turn the brightest day to cool twilight.

I switched the radio on low to drown the small noises of my day-living neighbors. Sleep sucked me under to the soft music of Chopin. A minute later the phone rang.

I lay there for a minute, cursing myself for forgetting to turn on the answering machine. Maybe if I ignored it? Five rings later I gave in. "Hello."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

It was a woman I didn't know. If it was a salesperson I was going to

become violent. “Who is this?” I blinked at the bedside clock. It was eight. I’d had nearly two hours of sleep. Yippee.

“I’m Monica Vespucci.” She said it like it should explain everything. It didn’t.

“Yes.” I tried to sound helpful, encouraging. I think it came out as a growl.

“Oh, my, uh. I’m the Monica that works with Catherine Maison.”

I huddled around the receiver and tried to think. I don’t think really well on two hours of sleep. Catherine was a good friend, a name I knew. She had probably mentioned this woman to me, but for the life of me, I couldn’t place her. “Sure, Monica, yes. What do you want?” It sounded rude, even to me. “I’m sorry if I don’t sound too good. I got off work at six.”

“My god, you mean you’ve only had two hours of sleep. Do you want to shoot me, or what?”

I didn’t answer the question. I’m not that rude. “Did you want something, Monica?”

“Sure, yes. I’m throwing a surprise bachelorette party for Catherine. You know she gets married next month.”

I nodded, remembered she couldn’t see me, and mumbled, “I’m in the wedding.”

“Oh, sure, I knew that. Pretty dresses for the bridesmaids, don’t you think?”

Actually, the last thing I wanted to spend a hundred and twenty dollars on was a long pink formal with puffy sleeves, but it was Catherine’s wedding. “What about the bachelorette party?”

“Oh, I’m rambling, aren’t I? And you just desperate for sleep.”

I wondered if screaming at her would make her go away any faster. Naw, she’d probably cry. “What do you want, please, Monica?”

“Well, I know it’s short notice, but everything just sort of slipped up on me. I meant to call you a week ago, but I just never got around to it.”

This I believed. “Go on.”

“The bachelorette party is tonight. Catherine says you don’t drink, so I was wondering if you could be designated driver.”

I just lay there for a minute, wondering how mad to get, and if it would do me any good. Maybe if I'd been more awake, I wouldn't have said what I was thinking. "Don't you think this is awfully short notice, since you want me to drive?"

"I know. I'm so sorry. I'm just so scattered lately. Catherine told me you usually have either Friday or Saturday night off. Is Friday not your night off this week?"

As a matter of fact it was, but I didn't really want to give up my only night off to this airhead on the other end of the phone. "I do have the night off."

"Great! I'll give you directions, and you can pick us up after work. Is that okay?"

It wasn't, but what else could I say. "That's fine."

"Pencil and paper?"

"You said you worked with Catherine, right?" I was actually beginning to remember Monica.

"Why, yes."

"I know where Catherine works. I don't need directions."

"Oh, how silly of me, of course. Then we'll see you about five. Dress up, but no heels. We may be dancing tonight."

I hate to dance. "Sure, see you then."

"See you tonight."

The phone went dead in my ear. I turned on the answering machine and cuddled back under the sheets. Monica worked with Catherine, that made her a lawyer. That was a frightening thought. Maybe she was one of those people who was only organized at work. Naw.

It occurred to me then, when it was too late, that I could just have refused the invitation. Damn. I was quick today. Oh, well, how bad could it be? Watching strangers get blitzed out of their minds. If I was lucky, maybe someone would throw up in my car.

I had the strangest dreams once I got back to sleep. All about this woman I didn't know, a coconut cream pie, and Willie McCoy's funeral.