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## Chapter 1

It amused him that something as prosaic and clichéd as coming into town for supplies could be so satisfying.

Still, it was obvious even to him why it was. The citizens of Littleton, Maine, treated him like just another member of their little, isolated society. A slightly odder than normal citizen, to be sure...He did, after all, live a good seven miles outside of town, in a house that was isolated and self-sufficient in an area that had taken both ways of life and elevated them to an art form.

He rarely came into town. Twice a month at most, to collect his mail and fresh fruits and vegetables. A brief stop at the local hardware store if there were supplies he needed. An occasional break in this pattern to collect something from one publisher or another, usually polite but firm rejections. He'd tried to publish four books in the ten years since he'd moved to Littleton...Repeatedly in several cases...But no publisher wanted anything more to do with him, even though his first book had been a bestseller.

They had seen to that. Just like they'd killed Tom. Just like they'd driven him to find a place to hide in the furthest backwaters of upstate Maine.

He sorted through his mail as he walked back to his truck, tucking the few bills and real bits of mail into a pocket of his coat, unconsciously marking the rest for disposal at the first trash can he ran across. He shook his head, amused by the amount of junk-mail he got. Ah, but here were two more rejection notices. Too bad, too...He felt that his latest novel was his best yet. Horror fiction at its finest. Howard would've been proud.

With a sigh, he dropped the junk mail in the trash can outside Walter's General Store, and headed inside. The little bells over the door announced his arrival, and Walter himself looked up from behind the counter.

"Well, well...Justin, nice to see you down off the mountain for a change."

"Morning, Walt. How's the wife and kids?"

"Doing well. Heard from Jim down in Bangor...Grandkids are doing well. Just starting middle school. Makes me feel old. Not that you'd understand that feeling."

Justin smiled wryly, "No, Walt? You might be surprised."

Walter snorted indelicately. "Bullshit. If you're a day over thirty, I'll eat one of those toner cartridges you had me order."

"They come in yet?"

"Yep. And the reams of paper too. Put it all in a box for you, got it here behind the counter. Anything else you need while you're here?"

"Not today, Walt. Sorry. Oh...Wait...Actually, I could use a box of light bulbs. Sixty watt halogens, if you have 'em."

"Sure thing. Had a feeling you were forgetting something. Let me go get a box for you, while you wrack that brain of yours trying to remember anything else you might've forgotten."

Justin chuckled as Walter went to get the light bulbs...But even still, he glanced around the store twice. Just to make sure.

"You're an odd duck, Justin," Walter's voice said from the back room. "Young fellow like you should be married and raising a family instead of living all alone in the back ass end of the country."

Justin leaned on the counter. "Yeah, well...Would you believe me if I said been there, done that?"

Walter emerged with the requested box of light bulbs, plunking them down on

the counter. He paused and took a good look at Justin. "Ordinarily, someone your age, I'd say bullshit again. But you do have the look of one who's loved and lost about you. You must've been real young."

"Younger than I am today." Justin dug out his wallet. "What do I owe you?"

"Two-fifty and change."

Justin dug out a credit card and passed it over.

"So," Walter said while they waited for the card to authorize, "Divorce?"

"No...Accidental death by misadventure. She was shot, completely at random."

"Drive by shooting? That why you moved up here from New York?"

"Something like that." After all, Justin thought, a man mounted on horseback with a pistol had sort of been the 1861 equivalent of a drive-by shooting.

Walter looked at him closely while he signed the credit card receipt. "You know, maybe you are older than you look. Ten years you've been here, I don't think you've aged more than a day. If you've found some sorta fountain of youth up there on the mountain, I do wish you'd share."

Justin smiled tiredly and handed the slip back to Walter. "Nothing like that, I'm afraid, and nothing I could share. The men in my family age very slowly, that's all. I'll probably still look like this when I'm your age."

"I'd say lucky you, but there's something to be said for getting older. When you look like you've got the experience under your belt, people sorta have to listen to you. Fellow like you...Bet you were still getting carded for beer when you were twenty-five."

"Damn straight. Even with a beard."

Walter chuckled. "Here's your boxes. Don't be such a stranger, huh?"

Justin smiled as he made a show of hefting the six reams of paper, two toner cartridges, and box of light bulbs. "I'll do my best, but you know me...That freak who lives up on the side of the mountain and scares away little kids."

Walter laughed. "The day I hear someone say that, I'll let you know."

"Take care, Walt. Say hi to your wife for me."

"Done and done."

Justin continued to make a show of carrying the heavy box as he took it out to his truck and hefted it into the back. He was always careful to do so, not wanting people to know how strong he was. After all, anonymity was his first, and best, defense.

He sighed a little, knowing that he'd either have to move on soon, or find a way to change his appearance enough to lay suspicions to rest. He'd often tried that in the past, but it was only recently that makeup had advanced to a point where it could be convincing.

"Hey, Justin!"

He turned, startled out of his reverie, realizing he'd been leaning against the back of his pickup truck and staring off into space. The woman calling to him was the principal of the local high school. He waved.

"Call me sometime this week," She shouted from across the street, "I want to talk to you about teaching a creative writing class again in the fall!"

Justin smiled and waved. "I'll call! I'd love to teach the class again."

She returned his wave and went about her errands. He shook his head slightly, clearing the last of his wandering thoughts, and climbed into his truck. With a rumble, the engine started, he pulled out into the street, and drove off in the direction of his house.

It wasn't a long drive, really...ten minutes of slow crawl to the edge of town, then another fifteen minutes of bumpy back roads, some unpaved, others gravel, until he reached the end of his long driveway. Just enough time to shake loose the last of his melancholy thoughts...not nearly enough to prepare him for what he found.

As he rolled through the heavy gates at the edge of his property, he sensed it.

One of them, a full-blood, up near his house. He brought his truck to a skidding halt and closed his eyes. Not just near his house, then...AT his house. He opened his eyes again and, with a little frown, took mental stock of the contents of his truck.

One box of general supplies. Two bags of fresh groceries. Spare tire. He grimaced slightly, remembering that he'd broken his tire iron trying to dislodge a stone that had gotten lodged in his undercarriage. Nothing particularly useful as a weapon.

Justin grimaced again. He didn't want to retreat from his own home. Still, he could go on the run, if he had to. With a little sigh, he focused his other senses, trying to gain some idea of why he had a visitor.

To his surprise, he felt no sense of hostility...fear, desperation, hunger...but no hostility. He blinked slowly, then put his truck back in gear and drove slowly up to his house.

She was there, well back in the shadows of his roofed porch, pacing back and forth. As he pulled up and stopped, she stopped and turned to face him, and he got a good look at how pale and emaciated she was. There was a nervous, twitchy quality to her, which he attributed immediately to hunger. Her dark clothes...black jeans and a dark blue t-shirt...didn't help her appearance at all. She looked ragged though, as if she'd been...on the run.

He hid his confusion behind a bland facade as he climbed out of his truck, keeping it between them for now. He was confident that he could take her...she'd be weak, in her condition. Far weaker than he, even though he wasn't exactly at his best either.

She came to the edge of the porch, hesitating just within the edge of its shadows, shielding her eyes against the summer sun. "A-are you Justin Conlann?"

Inwardly, he grimaced. So he had been found. Damn, and he'd been so comfortable here. He nodded slowly, replying "I am...and you are?"

With a little fidget, she backed into the shadows a bit more. "I'm...Deirdre Carling...everybody calls me Dee."

Justin watched her carefully, coming around the front of his truck slowly and flaring his nostrils to catch her scent...he blinked. She was like him...Dhampir, a half-breed. He'd thought her not much past four weeks turned, maybe five. It was shocking to meet another Dhampir...he'd long thought himself the only one alive.

He stopped at the foot of his porch stairs, watching her. She didn't look much older than twenty-one...but then, he himself looked barely a tenth his actual years.

She fidgeted again. "I'm not here to hurt you. I just...thought..."

"How did you find me?"

His tone of voice made her flinch back. "I...I'm good with computers. Once I figured out your name's anagram, it wasn't hard to find you. I mean...you own property under a similar name, rent it to yourself under what I think is your real name..." She trailed off, uncomfortable under his gaze.

Justin watched her from the bottom of the short stairs, eyes narrowed, trying not to show his confusion. Everything he'd learned over the years told him that this woman before him was a predator, prone to violence, inherently bloodthirsty...his own bloodlust had only been quenched by serving in three, or was it four, major wars. And yet, she was cowering away from him. Visibly afraid of him. She even smelled afraid, and if he could scent that...

He frowned a little. "All right, so you're good with computers. Why are you here?"

She flinched a little again at the harsh tone of his voice. "I...I read your book. When I told my father I wanted to meet you, he gave me this," She dug an envelope out of the inside pocket of her leather jacket, "and sent me to find you."

Justin stared at her blankly for a moment, then took three steps back and sat down heavily on the front bumper of his pickup. "Your father?"

Deirdre nodded, her short, curly red hair bouncing. "He said you knew who he was. His name is Nicodeamus."

He stared at her blankly for another long moment, stunned, then rubbed a hand across his mouth, then sighed. "I think you'd better come inside and sit down, girl. For one thing, I'm going to need a stiff drink if you've got any more surprises for me."

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting on either side of the little round table in his kitchen, watching one another uncomfortably. Justin had put a mug of warmed blood in front of Deirdre, while the envelope sat unopened between them.

"Drink it," he said, gesturing with his chin. "You're going to waste away."

She nodded and sipped from the mug, sighing a little and interrupting him as he opened his mouth to say something. "I think you should read the letter before going any further."

Justin watched her for a moment, then nodded, picked up the envelope, and slid the folded sheets of parchment out, unfolded them, and read.

*Justin,*

*Firstly, pray forgive my impertinence in using your given name. Though we have never met in person, I feel I know you very well indeed, and you have my deepest respect. I like to believe that I have earned your respect as well. We are closer, after all, than perhaps you realize. I owed you a great debt for having dealt with your father, a long-time opponent of mine on this grand chessboard, and repaid it gladly by convincing the Council to spare your life during those unfortunate days ten years ago when your good friend was...used so very poorly. I hope to someday be able to apologize to you in person for not being able to save him as well.*

*Be that as it may. I have two great favors to ask of you, though I've no doubt in the discomfited state this letter of introduction will find you, you will be hard pressed to find good reason to read further. I am relying on the curiosity you have shown in the past to carry you forward though it. For though you have surely come to realize that our nature is no more blessing or curse than any other way of life. True, it has its benefits and its difficulties...but so too does the human condition.*

*Moving on to the favors I have to ask of you...I present to you my daughter Deirdre. My daughter in truth, as you have no doubt already discerned. She, like you, is a half-blood...a Dhampir, as the Romanians quaintly dubbed the breed so long ago. Supposedly, the natural enemy of we called Vampires by modern society, and thus banned in our society and hunted when found. Though she herself did not know of her nature until a scant two weeks ago...her mother and I went to extraordinary lengths to let her grow up, believing herself to be a normal human girl.*

*Thus, I send my daughter into your care, or so I hope to do. For those around me have discovered that her mother was not always one of us, and that my daughter, raised in seclusion, is one of those so feared and hated amongst us. It is my most devout hope that she will arrive at your doorstep safely, though she may be hounded and you should keep a wary eye out if she does indeed arrive. I beg of you, protect her. Teach her what she needs to survive...indeed, to thrive, as you yourself have done.*

*That is the first favor I ask. If she arrived at your doorstep, and you deigned to read this letter, I have no doubts at all that she is safely in good hands. The second favor may be more or less of a*

*challenge to you personally, depending on how you choose to see it.*

*I want you to return to hunting Vampires. Specifically, those who were responsible for the death of your so-good friend a decade ago. Their bloodlines are those responsible for all the terrible stories of our kin throughout the years, as well as your friend's untimely demise. Thus, I doubt you will find it a terrible chore to do so...just as I doubt that you find your quiet, repressive life today even remotely satisfying.*

*Not that I ever wanted my daughter involved in such things. However, due to her nature and my visibility in our...closely-knit community, she is involved. I kept her safe as long as I could. Now I beg that you do so in my stead, and perhaps she can be of some assistance to you in the future I've asked you to take up. You are a Knight, my boy, in this grand game of chess we play, and I would see you move again.*

*Do not decide right away about the second favor. If you wish to remain in your quiet life, I will not hold it against you...I myself have oft wished for such a life. But I pray...yes, I pray...that you will not turn my daughter away.*

*If you decide to honor my requests, and have need of aid, Deirdre knows how to contact me safely. Ask, and I shall do my very best to be of assistance.*

*Yrs. in hope,  
Nicodeamus*

Justin laid the parchment sheets down and ran a hand over his chin, then sighed softly. In for a penny... "All right. I'll teach you what I know, and try to...I don't know...keep you on the straight and narrow? You don't want to die, do you?"

"Aren't I already dead?"

Justin smiled. "Technically, no. But you know what I meant."

She considered the question seriously. "...No, I suppose I don't, really. I want to live, or whatever this amounts to."

"Drink up then, before you starve."

"Can't I eat normal food? I tried some a couple of days ago, but it didn't fill my stomach."

He nodded. "You can, it just won't do much for you nutritionally."

"Oh." She wrapped her hands around the mug, still warm from his microwave. When she picked it up and sniffed it, her nostrils flared and her eyes widened.

"Justin, this is..."

He nodded again. "Human blood." He smiled. "I have an arrangement with a few of the local hospitals and blood banks. I make regular, and fairly sized monetary donations."

"Oh." She sipped it slowly.

"You say that a lot."

She gave him a long look, then replied, her tone deeply sarcastic. "Well, let's face it...until recently, I thought your book was fiction, my parents were human, and I was too. Let's see how aptly you reply to startling statements when you've had so much piled onto you at once."

Justin grinned, enchanted. "Well said, Deirdre, well said. I think we'll get along all right."

"I hope so," she replied, sipping from her mug. "I got the impression from my father that I was sort of stuck with you."

He nodded slowly. "You may be. Do you know if you've been followed?"

"Absolutely." She grimaced. "I made the mistake of paying for a motel room with

a credit card five nights ago."

"Oh? What happened?"

"Let's just say, the motel isn't there anymore."

Justin's eyebrows went up. "Hmm. That's not good. Whoever's after you really wants you dead."

"Well...I remember reading in your book that dhampirs are supposed to be the natural enemies of vampires. I suppose that has something to do with it." She tilted her head, green eyes peering into his own grey ones. "Maybe you can clarify?"

"I can...if you don't mind listening while I pack a few things. I don't think we should stay here." He got up, and she followed, bringing her mug. "Can you shoot, by any chance?"

"Pistols." She nodded. "I told father when I was sixteen that I wanted to learn how." A little smile flickered across her lips. "I thought it'd be exciting."

"It will be." He opened the basement door and descended, Deirdre close behind. "Okay...dhampirs are traditionally held to be the offspring of a vampire male and a human female. That much is true."

She lowered her nearly-empty mug and interrupted. "Never a female vampire and a male human?"

Justin shook his head, moving two folding tables that were stacked against a at the back of the basement, revealing a heavy metal door. "Not that's been recorded. I won't rule it out altogether, not having proof that it's impossible, but..."

"It's never happened, to your knowledge."

He nodded. "And my knowledge of the subject is extensive. At any rate, most stories about dhampirs involve them being compelled to kill their vampiric parent. I can't say that didn't happen to me, but my father was..."

Deirdre nodded. "My father mentioned him to me a few times. Not to mention how grateful he was when you..."

"Eliminated him."

"Euphemistically put."

"Thank you." He glanced at her, noting that she didn't seem unduly put out by his having killed his own father. He shrugged slightly and unlocked the door. "However, since you don't seem at all interested in doing away with your own parents..."

"No! I'm not at all! I love them both dearly!"

He glanced at her again, hand resting on the doorknob. There was no falsehood in her voice, no lie in her body's posture or in her eyes. "Which puts that legend to rest." He smiled. "Thank you." The knob turned with a slightly rusty creak.

She put her mug down on a shelf near the door. "What's down here that you need to pack?"

Justin gave a steady pull and the door groaned open, rust flaking off the hinges. He winced a little. "Just a few things."