
THE ART OF SABOTAGE

By R. Shannon



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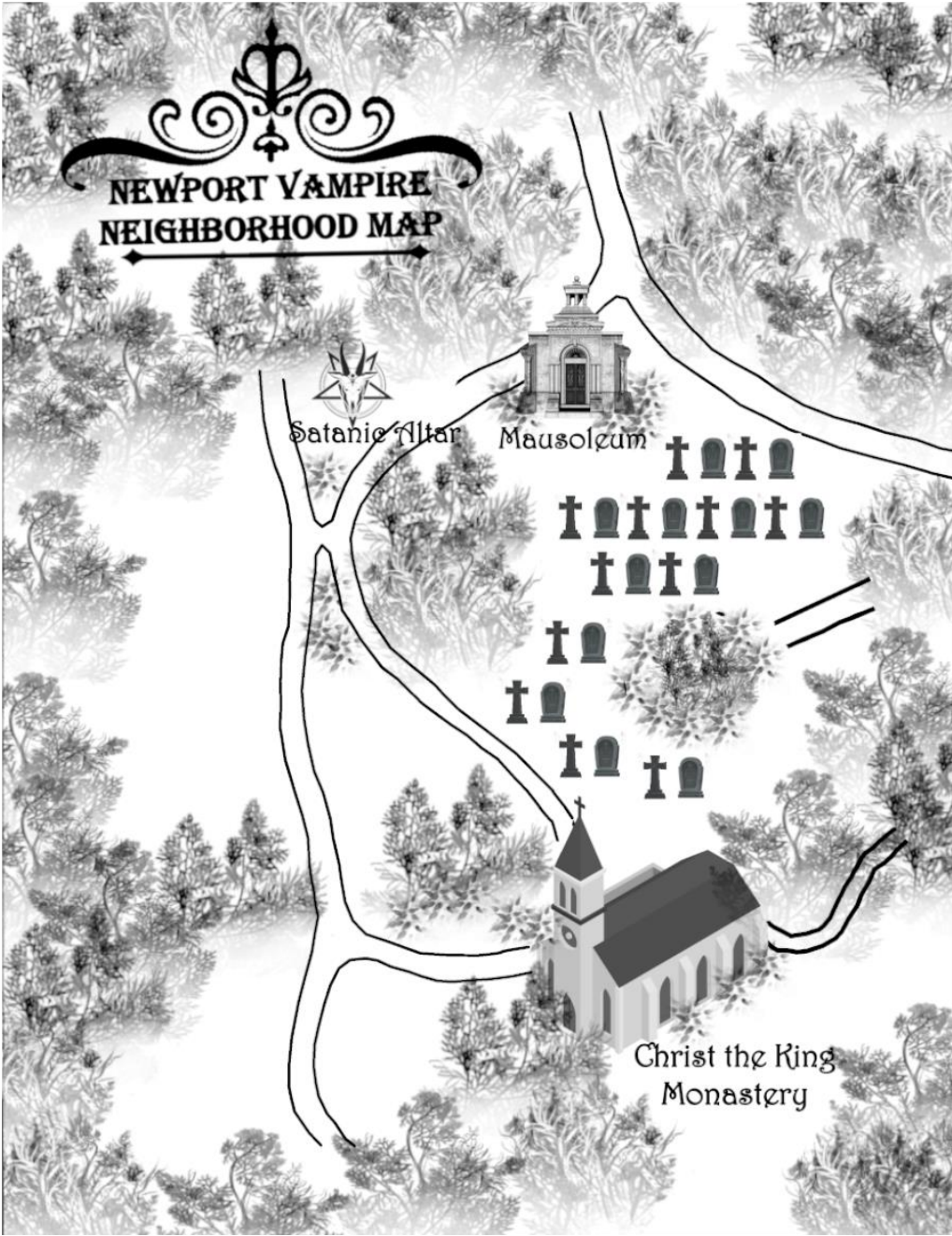
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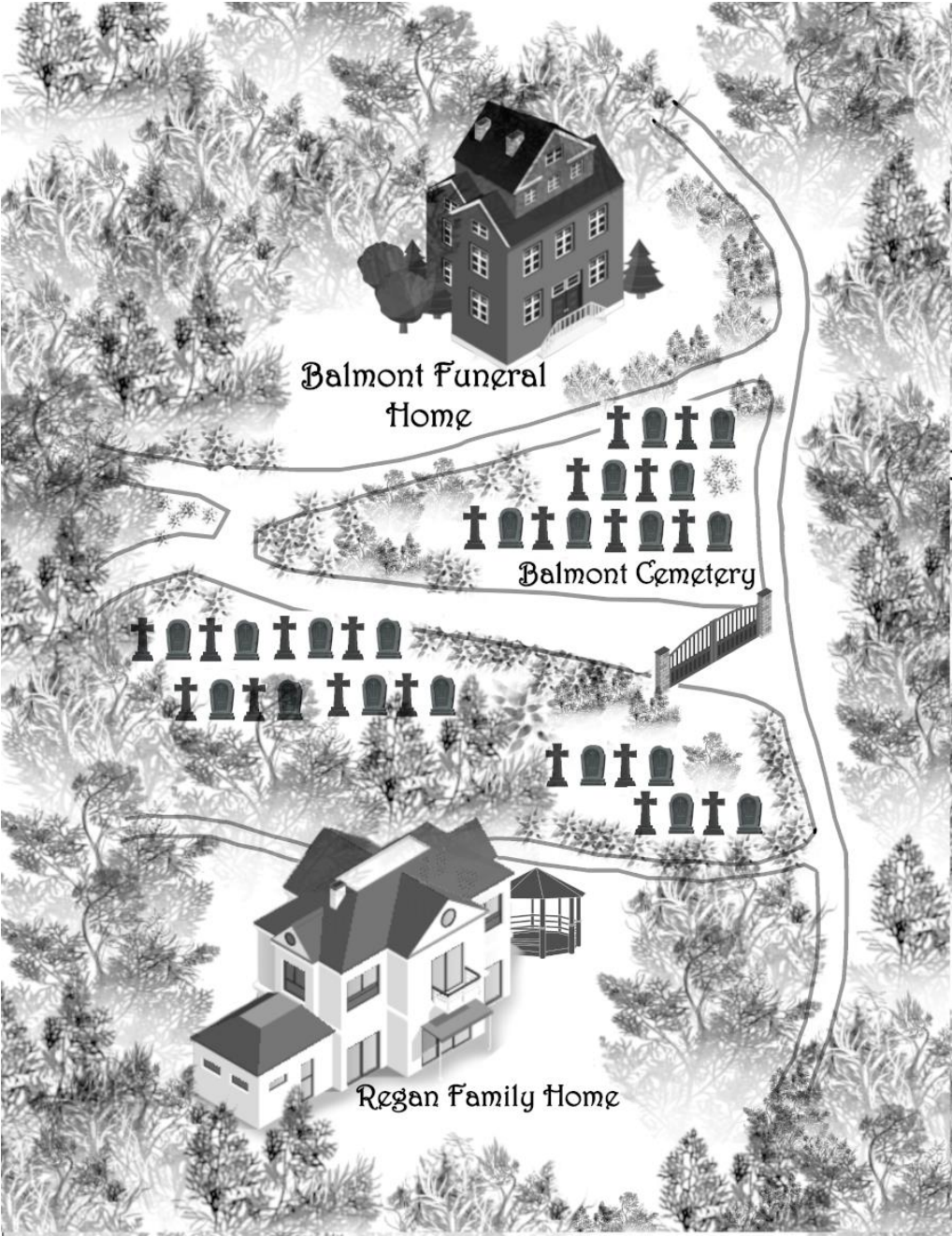


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OTHER BOOKS BY R. SHANNON:



CHAPTER 1

IT WAS LATE November in Newport, Rhode Island. The weather was getting colder and harsher as they went deeper into winter. Besides one or two small snow flurries, the roads and lawns were still clear of any snow or ice. Daylight savings time brought dusk at 4:30 in the afternoon. In the world where vampires lived, this was a welcomed change.

Charlie, the main embalmer at the Balmont Funeral Home, began dressing for work. He thought about Marguerite who lived in the apartment next door. He fell in love with her from the first day they met. Unfortunately, she was possessed by Darius, the vampire who owned the funeral home – who was also his boss.

Darius met and possessed Marguerite on a train ride one night. She had recently broken up with an old boyfriend and was basically homeless. She had been going from friend's couch to friend's couch for a week at a time. Darius brought her to the funeral home and gave her more than just stability. He taught her how to embalm and obtained a fraudulent embalmer's license for her. Within a month, she had a new driver's license, and a social security card under a new identity. She lived in a luxury apartment down the street until the apartment next to Charlie opened up. Then Darius moved Marguerite there so she could be closer to him.

From the outside, the Balmont Funeral Home looked like a lovely, old world funeral home serving their community. But the residents of Newport had no idea they had been invaded by a violent vampire and his trouble-making bevy of women. Darius was calm, charming, and mannerly to the public. He was well liked and had become well-respected in the area. No one other than those who lived with Darius knew how dark his non-public demeanor could be.

Marguerite was Darius' main girlfriend for a while. She was the center of his attention until he met and fell madly in love with Ciara, the daughter of one of the richest families in Newport. All of Darius' women were beautiful and he claimed to love them all. But for some reason no one could fathom, he was not only in love with Ciara, but he was obsessed by her. She not only had this unusual power over him, but she had a very calming effect on him which they were all grateful for.

Darius' obsession with Ciara caused him to neglect Marguerite and she kept falling out of his power. When he neglected her for three days, his spell over her would break. Her denial would end and she would suddenly want to go off on her own. She confessed to being in love with Charlie recently and they had begun planning to escape.

Marguerite was a bit impulsive and wanted to run as soon as she felt Darius' power fade. But Charlie was more practical and he knew they needed new identities before they could make a successful getaway.

The main problem Charlie needed a solution for was how he and Marguerite could escape without detection as Darius recently purchased the crematorium down the block and he could kill them and dispose of their bodies in less than twenty minutes. And nothing triggered this vampire's anger more than disloyalty. Running away from him would be seen as a first-degree disloyalty felony.

Charlie tucked his shirt into his pants and began tying his tie. "*He hasn't visited Marguerite for three days so she should be fully outside of his control now. I just don't know if we can do it by tonight. Making a clean getaway will take a bit more planning. I've got to find out the name of the guy who gets Darius the forged documents. We can get new identities, then run away and become someone else so Darius can't find us.*" He had an idea that he planned to implement today.

After dressing, he left his apartment and slowly descended down the staircase from his apartment on the top floor. Most of the staff lived in separate apartments on the fourth floor of the funeral home. He thought of how much embalming work he had ahead of him today. There was Mr. Sean Burke who was delivered from the Newport Emergency Room yesterday after dying as the result of a motorcycle accident. He wasn't wearing a helmet and the side of his face had road rash injuries. Charlie needed to cosmetically fix the injuries so his family could have an open coffin. The deceased was only 33 years old. Charlie laid out the process of his day in his mind as he took one step at a time down the long winding staircase.

Another body, which was delivered late last night from the coroner's office, was now in the freezer. That body would need to be moved over to the crematorium. As a rule, the customers in the funeral business were much easier to deal with than the general public because they were all dead. They made no complaints, they offered no back talk, and had no attitude. Charlie expected a busy but stress-free day. That was his first mistake.

Once in the office, Charlie put on the coffee in the little kitchen area the staff shared. He walked around back to speak to and help Mitch, as he did every day, but there was no Mitch. Mitch was their driver for four years and he came every day, whether there was a funeral pickup or not. He sort of *came with the business*. He worked for the previous owners and continued working for Darius without any interruption. Driving for the funeral home was not quite a full-time job, so it fit well with his retirement.

Mitch preferred to be paid in cash, so that's how Darius paid him. Darius had an affinity for and attracted several friends and associates who walked on the wild side or were one inch away from being arrested at all times. It was a case of water seeking its own level. Because Mitch was reliable, loyal and no trouble, he was always on Darius' good side.

Not seeing Mitch as usual, Charlie's first thought was that he got caught in traffic on the way in. He secretly knew there was traffic every day and Mitch was either early or on time, but he figured it was possible there was an accident or some other unforeseeable occurrence that made him a little late. Looking at his watch every few minutes while he prepared the embalming room, a worried feeling gripped him. He went inside to check on the coffee. It was ready so he poured himself a cup.

Starla, the eighteen-year-old receptionist and salesgirl, came into work at one minute to nine like she always did. She too lived on the top floor of the funeral home. Darius found Starla, who ran away from her fourth foster home, one night hanging out in the

cemetery which was next to the funeral home. He also took her into his bevy of women -- more on that later. In her usually-bubbly way she said, "Good morning, Charlie."

"Hi, Starla. Listen, do you know anything about Mitch not coming in today?"

"No, I thought he came every day no matter what," said Starla, with eyes wide open.

"He does come every day but he's not here now. The funeral mass he needs to drive for is at ten o'clock. I hate to do this to you, Starla, but I need you to help me at least put Mr. Glenwood's coffin into the hearse."

"I guess," said Starla, with a worried look.

Charlie brought a rolling gurney over to the area where the coffin sat on the table by the exit door. "Starla, I need you to stand over here and as I move this side of the casket onto the lift, you just need to guide it on your end. I'll do all the heavy lifting."

"Okay." She got into position.

Charlie lifted one side of the coffin onto the casket lift and then the other side with Starla's guidance. He then rolled Mr. Glenwood down the ramp and outside to the parking lot. He pulled the hearse around and opened its back doors. It was now 9:30 and if Mitch didn't show up in the next three minutes, Charlie knew he would have to drive the casket to the mass first and then to the gravesite ceremony. He waited three more minutes.

"Starla, I have to go and take Mr. Glenwood to his funeral. Can't have a funeral without the deceased now, can we? That's a little funeral humor," said Charlie, flirting a bit with Starla. "When Mitch shows up, can you drive him over to Blessed Trinity Church --"

"I don't drive yet, Charlie."

"That's right. So have Marguerite bring Mitch and she can drive me back. She needs me in the embalming room today, so she'll be happy to pick me up."

"Okay, Charlie."

He drove off to the church and they never heard from Mitch or anyone else. He proceeded to lead the funeral procession from the church to the gravesite. It was almost noon when he drove the empty hearse back to the funeral home. He lost a much-needed half day, which he would have to make up by staying late tonight.



~ **Meanwhile** ~

Once Marguerite came down from her apartment upstairs, Starla filled her in on Mitch not showing up and Charlie having to drive for the funeral.

"I get a bad feeling about Mitch. He always shows up," said Marguerite. "I can do the embalming but Charlie or Darius will have to move Mr. Elkins into his coffin for his wake tonight."

"Charlie should be back by noontime," said Starla.

“That should be enough time,” said Marguerite. “Did you call Mitch?”

“I didn’t call Mitch because I don’t have his number,” said Starla. Starla was only working there for a few months so she was still *the new girl*.

“I’ll call him,” said Marguerite. After four or five rings, there was no answer. She wanted to leave a message, but his message box was filled. He was a baby boomer and some of them only knew how to make or receive a call, so he may not have even set up the voice mail system. At least that’s what Marguerite surmised.



~ Later the Same Day ~

A few minutes after dusk and in the safety of his cave, as he called it, Darius pushed open his coffin lid. He sat up and gave himself a minute to fully awaken. His lair was a finished cellar underneath the Balmont Funeral Home. His cave was hidden as there were five cement steps in the back of the funeral home that appeared to go nowhere. But set three foot back from view were double wooden doors that opened to what appeared to be a storage room.

The storage room was staged and had a brick wall five foot back from the entrance. The wall had a small narrow door that was disguised as only part of the wall. It led to a large living area that ran the length and width of the funeral home. Not unlike the workplace upstairs, his living quarters was decorated with antiques and other furniture Darius had collected since the 1800s. There was a living room, a desk study area, and a full bedroom with two antique wardrobes. He slept in the coffin in his bedroom but owned a queen-sized bed for other activities.

After a few deep breaths, he hopped out of his coffin and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He closed his coffin lid and saw Ciara sitting on his bed.

“Hello, Ciara. I thought you had school today,” said Darius, suppressing his smile.

“I didn’t make it again, Darius. I was too tired when I went home this morning at six. I think you are over-feeding with me again and it’s making me too tired,” pleaded Ciara. She had the dark circles under her eyes and pale skin to support her complaint.

Darius loved her dearly and wanted her to love him of her own free will. Lately, he had to repossess her and take her back into his power as he feared she would leave him. He couldn’t take any chances right now. He wanted to be with her forever and his love for her was deeper and more meaningful than he originally thought. But she created doubts in him that were causing an insecurity he found untenable.

Now back in his full possession, he was deliberately overfeeding blood from her to keep her energy low to prevent her from running away from him. But that strategy can be a tightrope walk so he had to be careful. Even under full possession somehow Ciara still maintained her own will. Darius knew it was because, unlike his other women, he never instilled fear in her. If he wanted her to truly love him, he would not be able to use fear as a weapon of control. Speaking from experience, he knew once he instilled fear into a woman, she would never fully trust him again and she could never truly relax. These were two blocks to true love.

“I’m sorry you didn’t make it to school, Ciara. To be honest, I think you’re having second thoughts about veterinary school. It’s a hard science and more than a full-time career. Are you sure you’re not having second thoughts?” asked Darius, as he walked slowly over and sat down next to her on the bed. He gently rubbed the side of her cheek with the back of his fingers.

“No. It’s hard studying, Darius, but I’ve always wanted to be a vet, ever since I was a little girl.” Ciara looked into his eyes and he held her in his gaze.

“Maybe I’m misinterpreting things. I love you very much. I never thought I would have another chance at real love, Ciara, but you have given me that. You know I want you to be happy. I’ll support you in any way you need me to.” He kissed her deeply and wrapped his arms around her. He felt her relax into his arms and he felt the power of his possession over her.

“So what did you do with the day?”

“I slept, Darius, because I was weak and tired. I’m still weak. It’s the blood loss.” She appeared on the edge of tears and this concerned him.

“I’m sorry, Ciara. I’ll be very careful going forward. I promise.” He stood up and he held her face in both of his hands. “I’m sorry and I’ll be so careful from now on. I promise.”

She smiled and reached up and held one of his hands. He kissed her on the forehead and turned to dress for a normal day in the funeral home.



Ciara remained lying on Darius’ bed, waiting for her strength to return. She read on her tablet and watched videos as her blood replenished and her energy returned.

Darius came up to the funeral home through the secret back stairway entrance. As he came into the office, he could tell from Starla’s face that something was wrong. He walked past her and into the embalming room. Charlie stopped what he was doing and took his mask and gloves off.

“What’s going on?” asked Darius.

“Mitch didn’t show up today and I had to drive for the funeral. It left us shorthanded. Marguerite started the embalming and Starla helped her and they both covered the phones. It’s been a bit of a madhouse without Mitch.” Charlie seemed unusually calm about things.

“What happened to Mitch?” asked Darius.

“We don’t know. We called him throughout the day and there was no answer. His voice mailbox is full.”

Darius stared at Charlie as he thought a minute. They all awaited his next command.

“Let me call the police and ask for a wellness check.” Darius went down into his own office and called the police, who agreed to go and check on Mitch.

Darius came back and asked, “Do we have any bodies that need to be delivered to the crematorium?”

“Yes, we do. We received one last night and one this morning,” said Starla.

“You two finish the embalming and I’ll deliver the bodies to the crematorium, Charlie.”

“Sure thing, Darius.”



The day without Mitch continued chugging along with everyone pitching in and making it all happen. Mr. Elkins was dressed in his suit and tie, his makeup was done flawlessly, as was his hair. When Mrs. Elkins, his 98-year-old wife, saw him, she said he looked healthier than before he died. That was a great compliment in the funeral business.

The wake scheduled for the evening was mainly for family members. Darius presided over it and it would run smoothly without a single blip. All his wakes ran that way.

By 9:30 that night, the only one who had gone home around dinnertime was Starla. Marguerite and Charlie had stayed late finishing preparation of the two bodies and to see if Darius needed anything. After the last guest left, Darius turned to them and said, “You guys were great. So loyal. I’m grateful to have you.” Charlie and Marguerite were not used to a grateful Darius. This grateful and kind Darius was the result of Ciara’s love for him. She had a stabilizing effect on him and his mood was much better since he had repossessed her. Darius was grateful to them and they were grateful to Ciara.

“I got a call an hour ago from the Newport PD. Mitch was found dead in his apartment. The cops said it was a heart attack. That’s why he didn’t show up today.”

“Aww,” said Marguerite. “I had a bad feeling about him. He never missed a day.”

“They don’t make them like him anymore,” said Darius.

“Where will he be buried?” asked Charlie.

“I told the police if a family doesn’t claim him, we’ll take him. I’ll find a place for him in the cemetery. They’ll let us know.” Darius looked a bit sad. There was nothing Darius valued more than loyalty.



CHAPTER 2

JOHN-LUKE WAS dressed in the suit his new girlfriend Genevieve picked out for him recently. *New* was the theme of everything for him lately; new life, new rented-room, new wardrobe, new girlfriend and hopefully a new job. He was 24 years old, almost six foot tall, thin and quietly handsome. He recently graduated from the University of Florida with a Bachelor of Science degree. Just recently, he had fallen in love with Genevieve Regan, the daughter of a family of blue-bloods in the Newport area.

As he waited in the hallway outside some medical research rooms in the Newport University Hospital complex, he thought about the likelihood of him getting this job. He was applying for his first job in a teaching hospital with a scientist who was running her own study on a new blood product or technique -- or whatever it was. He didn't know enough about it to even classify it. All he knew was that it sounded like the opportunity of a lifetime.

He had Genevieve's father, Patrick Regan, to thank for this job lead. From what Mr. Regan told him, Dr. Liliana Rodriguez had come to the Bishop's Food for the Poor benefit held recently at the Regan estate home. She roamed around their drawing room looking and touching their possessions like she was in an antique store. Patrick went over to tease her about it and when she mentioned she was a local scientist, one thing led to another and he came away with her card and an invitation for John-Luke to apply to be on her research team.

He prayed for the best outcome and put things in God's hands. What else could he do? He only had a Bachelor of Science degree so he was trying to keep his expectations in line.



"Mr. Cullen, you can go in and see Dr. Rodriguez now." One of the young researchers left her office and John-Luke went inside.

"Hello, Mr. Cullen, have a seat here." Dr. Rodriguez pointed to one of two chairs in front of her work desk. Behind her was a long counter with all kinds of research equipment and vials and who knows what. A real-world lab looked completely different than a school lab.

"Hi, Dr. Rodriguez. Thank you for the opportunity to come in and speak to you about working here." John-Luke could feel his own nervousness. He hoped if it showed, it didn't work against him. She looked vaguely familiar from the charity benefit.

"Relax, please. I met your -- is he your future father-in-law?"

“I hope so,” said John-Luke smiling.

“That’s a good sign. I met him and he mentioned that you had a science degree and were looking for a research opportunity.” Dr. Rodriguez sat back in her chair. Her hair was dark brown, shoulder length and she was young and extremely attractive. She wore a dark print dress with a white lab coat over it. There was no pretense about her. John-Luke liked her right away.

“Yes, I have a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Florida. I majored in biology.”

“Very good. Do you have any plans to go for a master’s or doctorate?”

“I had a scholarship for a master’s degree but I had to pass on it for personal reasons, but I do intend to pursue it at another time. I’m getting on my feet in Newport, but maybe six months from now, I’ll try to get another scholarship.”

“Well, today must be your lucky day, Mr. Cullen. This hospital is associated with the Green University Medical School and there are several grants, scholarships and medical reimbursement programs attached to much of the work done in this lab, so I’m sure I can set something up for you.”

“That would be great.” John-Luke smiled and couldn’t believe his ears.

“I’ll need a couple of weeks to make sure I get the best program for you so I don’t wind up losing you from my team of researchers in the process. I’m speaking from experience, mind you.” He could tell she was making light of things for his comfort.

“You’ll be shadowing one of the other researchers until you learn the protocol and what the studies are all about. It’s all regulated, all built on the same testing and procedures. I would say the work may be a bit tedious with all the measurements and weighing and other data we need to pull, but nothing a biology major can’t handle.

“So when can you start?”

“I’m free as soon as you need me,” said John-Luke.

“You can come tomorrow if you feel ready. We had two of our researchers finish up their schooling last week and they have moved into another area and are now working on their PhDs.”

“I can come tomorrow. Do I come here?” asked John-Luke.

“Yes, come here at nine o’clock and I’ll walk with you first through HR and then through the lab and give you the basics. So bring something to take notes with.” She stood up silently indicating their meeting was over.

“I’ll be here tomorrow at nine. Thank you again for the opportunity,” said John-Luke.

“By the way,” she said sitting back down again, “when I was at the Regan banquet, I was so impressed with the antiques that Mr. Regan had in his home. I used to work in an antiques shop when I was in school and I fell in love with the older and finer things, I guess you could say.”

“Yes, many of their possessions have been passed down in the family from the 1800s and some even before then. They do have beautiful things,” said John-Luke.

“So they have the two daughters and one is your girlfriend?” asked Dr. Rodriguez.

“Yes, Genevieve. She’s my girlfriend.”

“Is she the blonde daughter?”

“Yes, that’s Genevieve.”

“And the brunette, what is her name?” asked Dr. Rodriguez.

“Her name is Ciara. She’s the older sister.”

“I see. Was that her boyfriend or husband I saw her with at the party?”

“He’s her boyfriend. His name is Darius.”

“He confronted me at the fireplace when I was looking at one of their Erte statues and he seemed quite bossy. I wondered what the attraction was to her,” said Dr. Rodriguez.

“Well, to be honest, her parents hope she will tire of Darius, I guess you could say, but right now she seems over the moon about him,” said John-Luke, raising his eyebrows.

“She looked like a very smart and lovely woman. I just wondered what the attraction was.”

“I couldn’t tell you,” said John-Luke smiling.

“Forgive me, sometimes I can be curious -- although some people might say nosy, but nothing could be further from the truth,” said Dr. Rodriguez, winking at him.

John-Luke chuckled to be polite.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” She glanced down at his resume and she asked, “Do you go by ‘John’ or ‘John-Luke’?”

“John-Luke.”

“All right, John-Luke, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll see you at nine o’clock.” He stood up and so did Dr. Rodriguez. He put his hand out and they shook.

As he walked to the parking lot, he shook his head in disbelief. Even on the remote chance that he was accepted, he thought there would be some kind of testing or paperwork or something, but it was over in ten minutes. Based on nothing but a recent party connection, his resume and cover letter, he would be reporting to a research job at a teaching hospital in Newport, Rhode Island in the morning. It seemed too good to be true. Or was it divine intervention? He chose to believe it was divine intervention as that was really the only explanation that made any sense.

He texted Genevieve. *‘When can I see you?’*

‘Right now. Do you need a ride?’

‘No, I’ll Uber. There’s too much traffic. Come to my room.’

‘I’ll drive over in ten minutes.’



~ A Little Later On ~

John-Luke lived in a rented room in a large estate home about five minutes from the Regan home. The owner, Inga, was originally from Russia and she had turned the twenty-room home into a boarding house. Her teenage granddaughter lived with her, along with several cats. She rented out several rooms to an eclectic group of strangers; and boy, were some of them strange. People who rented rooms were a breed unto themselves as John-Luke was learning day by day.

His new girlfriend had laid down the rule with him that he needed to come down to the front door when she came over so she didn't have to walk up to his room on her own. A few of the residents had already spooked her so John-Luke was only too happy to escort her in and out of the home. He didn't hold it against her because these people were an odd bunch, starting with his landlady who was always watching someone or something out of the corner of her eye. She had an *always-suspicious* look about her whether she was doing laundry or feeding her cats.

Aside from renting out rooms, her other income was made reading tarot cards and giving psychic readings for people who came to see her from 5:00 to 7:30 at night. All the boarders were expected to stay out of the living room, which was her waiting room, and the dining room, which was her reading room, during those hours.

It was a few minutes after twelve when Genevieve came over so the house was quiet. He let her in the front door and they walked upstairs to his room and closed the door. They embraced and kissed for several minutes. They were only a couple for a few weeks, so they were still falling in love and everything in life was new and exciting.

"So I got the job with Dr. Rodriguez . . . and . . . she is going to find me a way to get my master's degree with either a grant or a tuition reimbursement or whatever. I can't believe it. The interview took less than ten minutes."

"John-Luke, that's great. I'm so happy for you." She hugged him with all her strength.

They sat on his bed and continued talking.

"So I'm starting tomorrow. It's pretty exciting. I texted my mother and she's happy for me, but she's hiding her sadness that I'm staying up here in Newport."

"I want to meet her," said Genevieve, as she tucked his hair behind his ear in a gentle and nurturing way.

"You will. You'll like them, my mother and grandmother. They're like a set of bookends. They would actually fit into this boarding house better than I do," said John-Luke chuckling.

"You mean because of the psychic landlady?" asked Genevieve.

"Yes, that and I think they would like it here in this old estate house with all the rooms and the beautiful open space."

Genevieve smiled as she got comfortable on his bed, leaning back against the wall.

John-Luke leaned over the bed on his elbow. “I want to tell you something but I want you to promise me you won’t say anything to your sister.”

“What?” asked Genevieve intrigued.

“After the interview, Dr. Rodriguez mentioned the antiques that she was looking at when she was at your house at the bishop’s banquet. After that, she asked about Darius, whether he was Ciara’s boyfriend or husband.”

“Why did she ask that?”

“She said that Darius had confronted her at the fireplace about looking at the antiques and she found him bossy.” John-Luke laughed out loud.

“He can be kind of bossy sometimes. Most of the time he’s so polite and so mannerly, but every now and then he barks a command at my sister and she jumps and does whatever he wants. It makes my mother see red.”

“I saw him give her one command at the banquet party, like ‘*come here*’ or something and she came right over to him. That was the only bossy thing I saw him do. I just think it’s so funny that he would put off a local scientist like that.”

“It is kind of funny.”

“Let’s go eat, Genevieve. What kind of food are you in the mood for?”

“I don’t have much of an appetite so let’s go to the mall and have a slice or two of pizza. Is that okay?”

“Whatever you want. Let’s go.”

They went for pizza and they called it an early night because John-Luke wanted to be fully rested for his first day on the new job.



~ Later that same day ~

The long day without Mitch was coming to an end at around nine o’clock. This was the first chance Darius had to deliver the bodies over to his crematorium. Darius had just taken over the crematorium and it was being managed -- a term he used lightly -- by Victoria, a vampiress he created when Darius over-bled and killed her. Thankfully, Victoria rose again and Darius decided to let her preside over the crematorium with her first blood source, a thirty-eight-year-old New Yorker named Looch.

Allegedly, Looch was six months from being a *made man* in the Italian mob in Brooklyn before he was bitten and taken into Victoria’s possession. Of course, the only source for this made-man information was Looch himself, so it was taken with a grain of salt along with rolled eyes by everyone at the funeral home. Now Looch was Victoria’s only source of blood and she kept him near death at all times as she was sucking half of his blood every day.

He slept most of the time on a cot that she set up for him next to the crematorium ovens. He was far from the arrogant and cocksure gangster who showed up looking for her only weeks before. Apparently, Victoria had a falling out with her mob father, Big

Sal Luciano, and her mob mother, Carmen Luciano, before running away from home and winding up in Darius' bevy of women.

Looch's job now was to load the cremation ovens when needed and guard and feed Victoria. Hopefully, he would survive until Victoria got a second feeder. She was on a full-time campaign of *reminding* Darius that she needed a new source of blood.



Darius delivered the two bodies to the crematorium; one was being delivered in a coffin and the other body was in a cardboard box. He did cremations now for the county and other low-income clients and they were often cremated in the equivalent of a large postal box. As he came in the back door of the crematorium, Victoria got up to greet him. She hugged him, which he allowed, but he was still guarded with her because she had tried to bite him twice in the last several weeks.

"Looch," Darius shouted.

Looch sat up quickly from his cot. He seemed startled but that was his usual state since Victoria sunk her teeth into him a few weeks earlier.

"Help me bring in these bodies," commanded Darius.

Looch got up and followed Darius out and assisted in bringing in the bodies from the hearse parked out back.

As Darius and Looch carried both bodies into the crematorium, Victoria followed behind him saying, "Darius, you haven't forgotten about getting me another blood source, have you?"

"No, I haven't Victoria. Listen, I've had a long day with a lot of problems, so don't start nagging me, Victoria."

"I'm not nagging you. But you told me that you were going to move getting me a blood source up on your priority list and I don't think you have," said Victoria.

Darius put the coffin down in front of the ovens. He turned to Victoria and said, "What you just said to me? That's nagging. That's what nagging sounds like. I know you want a new blood source. I'm working on it."

She gave him an offended look but didn't say a word.

He motioned to Looch to follow him out back to get the second body which was in the coffin. Victoria looked at him as he walked by again but said nothing.

They retrieved the coffin and Darius and Looch carried it in on a rolling gurney. As they were rolling the coffin past Victoria on the way in, she said, "And I don't mean this as a nag, Darius, but I'm still waiting for you to get someone to put another bathroom and a shower here somewhere for us."

"That's also nagging, Victoria."

"It's not really. You're hearing nagging whenever I speak. That's something on your side, Darius," she said in a whisper thinking it would be less irritating to him in a lower voice, but it wasn't.

Once the coffin was on the hydraulic-feeding table in front of the second oven, Darius looked directly at Victoria and said, “I want you to be more grateful to me, Victoria. Do you understand?”

She tried to turn away and look somewhere else, but he physically turned her around to look at him.

“You didn’t do so well living out in the woods by yourself. You managed to capture one young teen boy and suck three ounces of blood from him. Do you remember how you did without me?”

She deliberately averted her eyes from him but remained silent.

“You couldn’t and cannot survive without me and I want you to treat me with that level of respect. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Darius.”

“My God, I’ve never met a worse hen pecker than you, Victoria.”

“I’m not saying a word now, Darius.”

“That’s because you’re all pecked out. Your beak is ground down from pecking me since I walked in, not to mention yesterday and the day before.” He walked over to Looch.

“Looch, do these cremations now so that they are cooled and ground by morning and bring them over in this urn and this box. Don’t get them mixed up. Do you understand?” Darius gave the urn and the box to Looch who did look like he was moments from collapse.

“Yes, I’ll do them now,” said Looch.

“Don’t forget to take the metal handles off the coffin before you put it in the oven,” said Darius, as he started walking towards the back door.

“I won’t,” said Looch, as he walked over and put the urn and box down on the remains grinding table. He walked back and turned the two ovens on.

Darius walked past Victoria and she said, “Goodbye, Darius. Thank you for everything.”

“Goodbye, Victoria.” Darius smiled as he saw her biting her tongue and holding back from continuing to nag him. “And by the way, you better not kill Looch because you will be without any blood source. You need to give him a day or two to recover. He looks awful.”

She glanced up at him.

“Do you understand, Victoria?” Darius shook his head from side to side. She was his most defiant blood source and she was just as bad now as a vampire herself.

“Yes, I understand. I won’t kill him.” She looked up and Darius could tell she was dying to get into it with him, but she refrained. Although he would never admit it, he enjoyed lording control over women.



It was amazing how the loss of one driver could set the whole funeral business back on its heels. Darius thought about calling the day labor office to get a driver for tomorrow. Maybe he could get someone steady from the local drug rehab, but they could be a little unreliable.

As he drove from the crematorium back to the funeral home, he drove down past an off ramp from the highway and there was a twenty or thirty-something guy with a *will-work-for-food* sign. He observed the guy while sitting at the red light. Although he looked like roadkill at almost 10 o'clock at night, Darius wondered whether he could drive. He was obviously drunk and filthy from the streets right now but maybe with a shower and shave, he would do. He was extremely thin which could mean drug-addicted or just hungry and homeless.

Impulsively, when the light turned green, Darius pulled his hearse into the gas station right alongside the off ramp. He parked and walked over towards the drunk guy. The off ramp was well lit and as he crossed the street and approached the guy, he could see he had nice features. After sobering up and a good scrub he could fit the bill.

He approached the guy and introduced himself. "Hey, my name is Darius and I'm looking for someone who can work about four or six hours a day driving for \$150 a day to start. Do you think you would be interested in something like that?" Darius put his hand out to shake and after a drunken moment of hesitation, the guy shook his hand.

"Yeah, I sure would. But I don't have a license anymore," said the drunk guy chuckling.

"That's not a deal breaker," said Darius, raising his index finger. "I can see you're an alcoholic, but are you addicted to drugs?" asked Darius.

The guy raised his eyebrows and laughed at Darius' question.

"I'm an alcoholic mostly, but I like to get high too. Do you get high?"

"No, I drink a little but only socially," said Darius.

"What kind of driving do you want me to do?"

Darius could tell he was trying not to slur his words. "Driving a hearse for funerals."

"Whoa, funerals? Wow. I never drove a hearse."

"That's not a problem either. We can train you. What's your name?"

"Pete Lambert."

"Do you have family in the area, Pete?"

"No. I had family but I haven't talked to them in years. They still live in Boston." He swayed a bit and Darius reached out and stabilized him.

"Where do you stay at night, Pete? Do you have a woman or a wife?"

"I wish. No. I just stay wherever I can, mostly in the woods, or in a homeless shelter if it gets really cold." Darius saw Pete psychologically tap into times of struggle. He knew the look of it.

“Well, you can come back and stay over in my funeral home and then have a shower in one of the apartments in the morning. Then we can teach you how to drive for a funeral tomorrow morning. Would you be okay with that?” Darius could tell he was a harmless drunk, not a criminal thug.

“Yeah, that would be great. It would be good to sleep inside and out of the cold tonight,” said Pete.

“Come with me and I’ll get you some food and then you can come back and I’ll set up a gurney with a mattress that you can sleep on.” Darius led the way to his hearse. He had to guide Pete once or twice as he got too close to the curb as they walked over to the gas station.

Right before Pete got into the car, he said over the top of the car, “You’re not going to kill me or rape me or anything, right?”

“No, I’m going to get you food and set up a cot for you to sleep on. Then you can take a shower in the morning and I’ll pay you for a driving job tomorrow,” said Darius over the top of the hearse while looking at Pete.

“Okay.” Pete got into the hearse.

Darius got into the car and he asked him, “Your choice for food is Wendy’s or Burger King because they are on the way to the funeral home. What will it be?”

“Burger King,” said Peter. “You’re being very generous. I appreciate it.”

“It’s nice to be appreciated by at least some people,” he said, thinking back to Victoria’s constant complaining.

Darius could tell by his food order that Pete was hungry for a while. Once the worker handed him the food, he passed it to Pete with the following command: “There’s no eating in the hearses, so you have to wait until we get back to the funeral home to eat it, but I’m just down the road.”

“You like to tell it like it is, don’t you?” asked a still drunk and smiling Pete.

“Yes, I do. Why dither?”

“Right,” said Pete, nodding and chuckling.

Darius got Pete his Burger King and only had to remind him once about no eating in the hearses when he popped a French fry from the bag and into his mouth before they arrived at the funeral home.

It was almost ten-thirty when Darius pulled up to the funeral home. He expected it to be closed, but the lights were still on.

