

Slayer

by Mrs Blood

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Chapter 1 of 1

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I can understand that many will find my occupation unbelievable. You believe that vampires are the creation of gothic novelists and B-grade movie makers; you don't believe they actually exist. But to those of us who have seen the truth, for those members of the ancient Order of Draconard, vampires are very real indeed. I am one of those chosen to undertake The Great Work. I protect the innocent and fight the immortal beasts of hell. I am a vampire slayer.

One is not born a Slayer. It is akin to a spiritual awakening; you come to a realisation of what and who you are. One has to travel a path to reach such a realisation, and in that glorious, cathartic moment, you know what you were born to do. I went through my own private catechism seven years ago. I had been employed by the same company for more than twenty years, and I had worked myself into a groove so comfortable and mundane that I felt no need to escape. I kept the same routine, day in and day out, with no hope of promotion or advancement; each day brought the same collection of problems and solutions. I was happy, or at least I believed I was happy. I filled my life with superficial signposts that signified my own contentment: a job, a car, a house in the suburbs with my wife and two children. Now, I can only look back on those years with despair. I had wasted my life

I left the firm seven years ago. My boss, a woman ten years my junior, called me into her office and informed me that the company had plans to downsize. My job would, unfortunately, be eliminated; absorbed into several other positions, and there was no longer room for me. If I had displayed more ambition, she said, the directors might have considered moving me to a new placement, but twenty years in the mailroom had proved that I had no ability to progress. Unable to move with the times, I was simply not considered a team player.

No ambition! Her words echoed and tortured me. *What would they know of my ambition?*

Apparently, loyalty was not an important element for their team. Or dedication for that matter. More than twenty years sorting their mail, and they tell me a receptionist can do my job!

I believe I went a little mad then.

I could not tell my wife about the situation. It may not have been a glamorous job, but it had provided us with everything we needed, and I took great pride in it. I could not suffer through the look of shame and disappointment etched into her features every time she looked at me. She always said that I would amount to nothing; and there I was without a job and living up to her expectations. I had nothing. I got up at the same time every day, and I drove my car for forty-five minutes, to be two towns away, to spend my day in the local library. Getting another job proved almost impossible. I was fifty years of age and qualified for nothing. During those early days I avoided the depressing recruitment centres; I stayed well clear of anything that could possibly remind me of how worthless I had become. I can't describe how we lived that year. By the end of it all, when my severance pay had been spent, and we had no savings, my wife left me and took our children with her.

It is probably for the best; if they had stayed with me, I could never do this work. If one of these beasts learnt my identity, my family would make an easy target. It is better that they stay far away from me, out of harm's way; better that they forget about me entirely. Distance and isolation have their benefits. Still, in my darker moments I console myself with the belief that they would be proud of me, if they understood my purpose in The Great Work.

At my lowest point I found The Order of Draconard; or rather, I was lead to them. Lord Roderick tells us that all things happen for a reason, I found Draconard because I needed to find Draconard. I remember my discovery as the greatest single event in my life, as though I had woken from a coma. I felt truly alive for the first time. Christmas was coming, and I spent hours in the library reading, and distracting myself from my unemployed, miserable life. Mary had gone to her mother's and was threatening divorce. The library had free internet for members, and in a last ditch effort to win her back, I had decided to search the job sites one last time. It was a fruitless exercise, but one I resolved to try, for the sake of my family. I knew, before I started, that I would find nothing for a man of my age and limited skills; but I sat at the computer, staring at the screen and idly clicking the mouse through page after page of jobs I was ill qualified to do. Nothing interested me, especially the depressing job ads that seemed to mock my inadequacies and belittle me. Even the library had become abhorrent to me. The school holidays were upon us, and the usually quiet building had been overrun with noisy children and teenagers who giggled behind my back, as though I couldn't hear them.

It is ironic, then, that I owe the discovery of my calling to a pair of teenagers in baseball caps and jeans that hung down near their knees. They were looking for horror films online, and stumbled upon the Order of Draconard. They were laughing; exclaiming how only losers would frequent the site, and I, wanting to comfort myself after a morning of silent humiliation, noted the url and looked at the page on my own computer.

Half an hour later, a radiant smile was stretched across my face, and I knew what I was born to be.

The Order of Draconard is an ancient society for those who investigate and hunt the vampires who walk amongst us. The great Van Helsing himself was a member; and the current head is Lord Roderick, one of the men who fought and killed the Highgate Vampire in the 1970's. Lord Roderick made the decision to put the Order online, reasoning that it was the best way to attract new members. I suspect he knew that only they who are chosen would enter the site, and believe. And this is how it was for me. The disappointment and suffering, the loss and the shame: I had endured it all for a reason! They were necessary! My sufferings had formed my character, taught me endurance, and enabled me to believe. They lead me to the Order of Draconard.

It took me a year to train, to get strong, and learn all there was to know about the un-dead. Lord Roderick has written several books on the subject, and they were all available for purchase through the web site. He tutored me for a small fee, by correspondence. It took eight months for me to finish the course, and by the end, I was confident that I could recognise and kill the beasts. I sold my house, and although I kept very little for myself, I did purchase a state of the art computer to keep abreast of the happenings and news from Draconard. Home comforts no longer gave me pleasure; I lived only to complete my work, and so I left the countryside, and took up residence in one of the tiny flats housed in the many concrete council estates that scarred London's landscape. I was never the type of man that required luxuries to survive; a bed-sit with a mattress on the floor and an internet connection serviced my needs adequately.

I trained, building up my strength, knowing that I would need to become fit and agile. I started running, pushing myself until my muscles sang in pain and my lungs felt as though they would burst; and then I pushed myself harder still. In the first months of my regime, I was convinced that my efforts would kill me, but I came to endure it. I worked hard, taking cash in hand labouring jobs that I once considered beneath me. How I made money no longer mattered to me, and with labouring requiring no experience, I was happy to work for whatever money they could pay. The work built my muscles, and my strength, and as the months passed, I became strong. By the end of that second year, I was ready.

The first night I went out to hunt, I was fearful that I would not recognise a Vampire for the beast it was; but my fears were unwarranted. Vampires are surprisingly prolific. They haunt the night; perfect killing machines who lure their prey and feed from the font of human weakness. I have been killing them for five years come May. They tend to gather in places as dark as their own shadowy nature: dive pubs and nightclubs, where alcohol causes their victims judgement to become impaired, where the throb of music and the crush of bodies against each other causes the blood to pulse in human veins. I hate these places, and yet I am there every night, appalled at how people throw their bodies about, oblivious to the ever present danger that stalks them.

I have had infrequent opportunities to achieve a quick and easy kill, such as the one I found leaving Queens Park tube station three weeks ago. With his porcelain pale skin, and strange ethereal presence, I recognised instantly what he was. I followed him as he made his way through an alley to the stairs that accessed the flats above the shops. It was close to dawn, and he was obviously on his way home after a night of feeding. I caught him on the stairs and destroyed him like a feral dog. I was lucky that I carried a stake with me, but I had no garlic to pack the wound. It didn't matter, the sun was rising, and I was able to leave him to the elements. But these kinds of kills are rare, and only the very young ones are so easily overpowered. A kill usually comes after careful and meticulous planning.

I patrol every night, choosing a part of the city to cover over the course of a month. I move from borough to borough as part of a continual rotation, aware that I will never find all the vampires, but safe in the knowledge that there are others like me, who will succeed where I have failed. When I find a vampire and they are easy enough to find I follow them, observe their habits and learn their routines. It can take a week; or it can take a number of months, depending on my ability to arrive at an understanding of the beast in question. When I know the threat I am facing, I am then able to work out a plan to dispatch them. I have become efficient over the years, and my ability to kill has become almost routine. The thrill of the kill still excites me, however; and the knowledge that I am saving lives by slaying the un-dead fills me with a satisfaction so strong that, God forgive me, it borders on pleasure.

I have been tracking a vampire for several weeks now, and tonight I plan to finish him. I have found eBay to be an invaluable source of equipment; I found an authentic Vampire Killing kit from Victorian times, and I managed to pick up a C19 lock picker, which I used to enter the creature's flat tonight. This is always the worst part and the best; waiting for them to arrive home fills me with an excitement born of trepidation. I feel like Schrödinger's cat, existing in a state of limbo while the vampire lives out his last night, unaware of what awaits him.

Before setting out tonight, I logged into the Draconard forums and bid them farewell. It is a ritual I practise before every mission, because I know that when I step out the door to kill a vampire, I may be killed myself. The vampire might win; it is a morbid reality I accepted as part of my calling. Death does not scare me; since undertaking this work, I have come to believe that my sufferings will ensure that my own death would be beautiful. I am in no hurry to discover it, of course, but I can imagine that when I finally am at peace, my heavenly welcome will be glorious. If death comes at the hands of one of these creatures, I know I will not rise. I will lie in the cool earth for an eternity, and I will be at peace. To ensure this I have elicited promises from several of the Draconard members online; they will put an end to my torture should a vampire turn me; they will stake me in my grave. They are my kinsmen, and they will do this for me. I am thankful for that.

I flatter myself that I am the most successful hunter that the Order of Draconard has spawned in this modern age. When I posted my farewell tonight, the forum lit up with messages of support and well wishes. I admit that my internet celebrity gives me pleasure, but I accept such pleasure as God's reward.

The Great Work is not without its obstacles. I remember, when I first began, that I was a fool, believing that when I staked a vampire it would fall away to dust. I was wrong; the vampire bled heavily, and once it was dead I was left with a mess of blood and gore and a lifeless body. For those first few kills, I disposed of the bodies by wrapping them in plastic, taking them to Dover and throwing them over the cliffs. Unfortunately, those bodies washed up on the shores, and it irked me to think that an innocent would discover the corpse. Such a terrible sight is not easily forgotten, and the police are better qualified to deal with such horrors; for that reason now I leave the bodies where I killed them. I take precautions of course; I salt the area around them, pack the wound with fresh garlic, and flood the room with sunlight before I leave.

The collective press have dubbed me a serial killer; the newspapers have even given me a title: they call me the Vampire Killer. It is a name that is ironically true, but it is a name given to me simply because I *stake* the 'victim,' not because they have any true understanding of my mission. The police commissioner has made a statement, saying that staking the body is my calling card. Draconard do what they can to divert the press. Members have been sending letters to the newspapers and television stations saying that *they* are the 'Vampire Killer'. They have provided British journalists with hundreds of leads, none of them accurate. I don't have to worry about the police; Lord Roderick told me of a department in New Scotland Yard responsible for monitoring vampire activity, and they have instructed the police to keep secret the true nature of these beasts. The police feed the serial killer line to the press. They don't want to cause mass panic, and I can understand that. If the general population became aware that vampires really do exist, chaos would ensue. Innocent people could be killed by deluded fools who don't understand the true nature of the beasts. The killing of vampires should always be left to those who have been called as Slayers. The police understand that I am doing my job, and they leave me in peace to carry on. In my five years of Slaying they have never once come to question me.

I have occasionally considered writing a letter to the newspapers; I would like them to understand that I am no murderer. These creatures are not human; they are

animated corpses, inhabited by demons; how can I be guilty of murder if they are already dead? If they had it explained to them, carefully, if I could make them understand, they might give me some good press for a change. But they would never understand. They would think I'm a mad man. *They already think I'm a mad man.*

What is taking this vampire so long? I expected him well before this. The sun will rise in less than an hour, and I have wasted the night in this flat waiting for him. I should have followed him tonight, but when the time comes to kill, I prefer to be prepared and waiting for them. I have been observing this vampire for weeks, I know his routine, and tonight his pattern has changed; he is out later than usual. With sunrise so close, he should be getting ready for his day's slumber. I have to wonder if he has a death wish, or perhaps he likes to live dangerously.

He looks like a young man in his mid twenties. I recognised his true nature the first time I saw him in the street. He spends his nights in darkened bars, laughing with young women he can lure away and feed upon. I watched him leave a bar with a man once; he seems to have no physical preference. I should have stopped him well before this, but I will only have one chance to kill him, and I can't afford to make a mistake.

In his flat, I am able to gauge the measure of the man he once was. He is not alive; his soul has left his body a hollow shell, but as with the other vampires I have killed, I am amazed at how attached he seems to his possessions. This vampire is no different to others I have killed. His flat is full of material things. When I first entered his flat, I took the time to look through what he owns. I make it a habit to take an item with me, a memento of the kill. This vampire has many things of value, but nothing that I can readily carry. A discreet stereo system, a wide screen plasma television and a large number of CDs fill his shelves. He is also a voracious reader. He has hundreds of books, and, strangely, a collection of comic books and plastic action figures. In his living room, he has an aging chesterfield couch and an old, threadbare armchair. He even has food in his fridge; I can only imagine it is cosmetic so he appears human. It is surprisingly common; I think that every vampire I have killed has had food in their cupboards and refrigerators.

After exploring his living room and kitchen, I settled in to await his return. I walked through his home and rifled through his belongings. I have even used his toilet; and now I am getting concerned that he has realised I am here and has decided not to come home. Ridiculous! I am the mortal enemy of all vampires, and they aspire to kill a Slayer; if he knew I was here, he would have returned early to confront me. I am sure that he will come home soon, and when he does, I will finish him, ending his murderous reign. As the minutes tick by, my excitement and anticipation becomes almost palpable.

He is home! I can hear his keys in the door.

If he has brought a victim with him, I will be forced to confront him as he enters the flat. I don't like to do that. Such confrontations are dangerous, and the vampire will fight for his life. I am certain that I could over-power him, but vampires are strong creatures, and the few times I have been forced to really fight one, victory has come at a cost. Such encounters have left me battered and bruised. I now prefer the element of surprise, and when I first inspected his flat, I found myself a good hiding place behind his hallstand. I am well concealed now, and the excitement races through my veins like a drug. Here I am, a Slayer, hunting the hunter. From my position in the hall, I have an excellent view of his lounge room and hallway, and I realise that I am holding my breath in anticipation. I strain to hear voices, trying to work out if he has someone with him; a young man or woman who will be lucky tonight, for I will save them from his deathly embrace; but it is quiet, and he is alone.

When I look out from my hiding place, I can see him leaning against the back of the chesterfield. He pulls the earphones from his iPod out of his ears, and casually throws the device onto a side table. He takes his coat off and tosses it over the back of the couch, rifles through the pockets of his jeans, and throws the contents onto the table beside the music player. A few coins, a packet of cigarettes, lighter, travel card, and a pocket watch. From his back pocket, he retrieves his wallet, and tosses it on the table.

My interest has been caught by the pocket watch. From my brief glimpse I realise that it is old; certainly one hundred years at least, and I wonder if he has always owned it. How old could he possibly be? I have not seen a vampire with such an old fashioned watch before; they are usually so keen to appear human, that they tend to purchase modern devices. Some of them even take jobs in order to appear normal; although it appears to me that this one has no occupation, other than going to bars and attracting his prey. I begin to think that he must be an old one; an ancient beast in the body of a young man, and as the thought blossoms in my mind, I feel my excitement begin to mount. I haven't killed an old one before, at least not that I'm aware of. How many innocents has he slaughtered? How many will I save by killing him? I am immediately pleased and saddened; he has slipped through our fingers for centuries, and now, at last, I will be the one to finish him. I will take the watch with me when I leave.

When he finishes emptying his pockets, he turns and heads towards the hallway, pausing less than two metres from where I am sequestered in the dark. I have to fight every natural instinct not to move or make a sound. It will not do for him to catch me now, crouching like a coward behind his hallstand. He does not see me, and he doesn't even flinch as he passes the spot where I am hidden; he simply walks past me on his way to his bedroom at the back of the flat.

I expect him to go straight to bed; outside, the sun is almost up, but he surprises me by going to the bathroom. I can hear the sound of running water. He is having a shower. This is unexpected; I wonder what he means by it. Did his last meal struggle? I didn't notice any blood on his clothes, but he wears so much black, and the light in the flat is so dim. In the past, they have always come home and collapsed into their beds; the fact that he is washing himself seems odd, and I can't understand why, but it disturbs me.

His clothes are on the floor in an untidy pile; something I also find disconcerting. The flat is scrupulously tidy, he is cleaning himself, and yet he carelessly discards his clothes and the contents of his pockets. Does he have a woman come in to clean the flat, and if so, why? Why would he tolerate a mortal coming into this flat, when it's against his very nature to do so? Would this woman even realise who, or what, she cleaned up after? In a flat so small, where would he sleep while this person was cleaning? Perhaps I am wrong, and the bed in this room is not his resting place. Where does he sleep?

Without thinking, I pick up his shirt and find it dry. I drop it, unsure as to why I am interested. I have allowed my confusion to destroy my concentration, and now I am touching his filthy clothing; but I have learned one thing from my momentary lapse; his clothes aren't bloodied in any way so the question remains, why is he showering?

I realise that I have lingered too long over such useless questions. When the sound of running water finally stops, I hide myself in his closet. Silently I curse my own stupidity; to start questioning a vampire's existence is a rookie's mistake, and one I should be immune to making. So what if he's having a shower? Why should it bother me? It shouldn't. It's nothing. I have one purpose and one purpose alone: to kill vampires. And tonight I will kill this vampire, regardless of whether or not he is having a shower!

He is taking his time in the bathroom, and I am able to peer out from my hiding place into the lamp lit bedroom. It is a nice room, far better than any vampire deserves. Like the other vampires I have encountered, this one does not sleep in a coffin. Contrary to the old Hammer Horrors that so intrigued me in my youth, vampires tend to sleep in dark rooms and beds, and not coffins or crypts. When I first reported my findings to Lord Roderick, he seemed surprised; but after questioning me extensively, he was satisfied that I was telling the truth. He wrote an addendum to the vampire lore on the Draconard site, and I still feel proud that I have contributed knowledge to the ages. My own belief is that the vampires use beds in order to appear more human, but I have no doubt in my mind that the mattress is stuffed with dirt from his birthplace. It is one of the many quirks peculiar to vampires, that they must sleep on the dirt of their homeland.

His bed is large and heavy looking; made from dark polished wood. It does not look like a replica, and is probably quite old. He has probably owned it since it was new. It is luxurious; I can tell just by looking at it that the bed linen is of good quality. It is a mistake on his part, and a clue to his origins. He is presenting himself to the world as a pale faced, shoe gazing Goth; the kind that listens to screamer bands and talks about depression and death; but if he really was one of them, he would not be living in this kind of luxury. He'd have posters stuck on his walls with blu-tac and own furniture picked up from charity shops.

He walks into the room, and I freeze, afraid that he has seen me peering out of his closet; but he makes no moves towards me and doesn't seem to have noticed me. He is naked, apart from a towel wrapped around his hips, which he promptly removes and drags up over his body, using it to dry his hair. The sight of him actually takes my breath away, and I feel my stomach roll uncomfortably. He is so pale his skin the colour of alabaster. In my experience, vampires tend to go to great trouble with fake tans and dark makeup to disguise their true nature, but freshly showered, he shows none of this artifice. He is so pale that he is almost luminous; but then, I suppose, he is trying to pass himself off as a member of some death sub-culture, so the pale skin probably comes in handy.

He is of average height and reasonably slim. The musculature of his body is long and lean, but he does not look hard. His limbs are languid; the creamy expanse of his body looks supple, and somehow strong. I wonder just how old he could be; with his messy black hair, and the painted black fingernails, he looks very much at home in the present day. I cannot picture him existing in any other time than this. I feel my spirits fall; perhaps he is not as old as I first thought, but then I have to consider his apparent

wealth and his taste in furnishings, and I am once again buoyed. He has to be an old one; there is no way he can't be.

He turns and stares; *stares straight at me*, and panic rushes through my body. Yet, along with the panic comes a spark of recognition. I know this vampire, or at least I have seen him before somewhere and not from these recent times when I had been tracking him. The spark sits uncomfortably in my gut. I can't place where I know him from, but I am filled with a sudden certainty that I do.

He stands perfectly still, and I am certain that he has seen me. He smiles, and ruffles his hair, and after my confusion subsides, I realise that there is a mirror on the wardrobe door. He is staring not at me, but his reflection; or lack of one. From the inside of the closet, I can't see what has caught his eye, but he can't possibly be looking at his own reflection; it is well documented that vampires don't cast one.

While he stares at his empty mirror, I rack my brain trying to work out where I have seen him before. He is quite a specimen, probably chosen because he has a strange sort of beauty about him. They are vain creatures, vampires; they would choose to sire someone based only on their appearance. This one has eyes that are brilliant green; bright and clear, they seem to be immersed in the mirror, and it is his eyes that are sparking the recognition in my brain. His face is open and almost impish, his mouth wide, and looks as though he could smile at any moment. I imagine that his face might change from that of an angel to a devil in a split second. The hair on his body is inky black, marking a stark contrast to his pallid complexion. I can imagine that when he was a mortal man, he would have been popular with women.

I look away, hating him. He is too alluring. I have never felt this sort of attraction towards one of them before; I've never noticed what they looked like except to ascertain the beast behind the human facade. Why was he lingering in this fashion? Why didn't he just go to bed? Why did he have to take his time? I feel myself growing impatient. I want to kill him, so I can go home and bask in the afterglow.

He finishes drying himself, and from a chest of draws he finds a pair of black jersey pyjama pants and pulls them on, before turning down the bed clothes.

So he does sleep in the bed. At last I feel my anxiety settle.

He looks perfectly at ease, as though this is the ritual of a thousand mornings, not knowing that this will be his last one. I am satisfied that I will bring about the death of this creature, such as he is; a killing machine with a beautiful face. *A beautiful face?* Is he is playing a trick on my mind, making me think about him, and trying to illicit my sympathies?

I *will* kill him; no matter how powerful his thrall, I will kill him. By morning, the newspapers will be reporting that the Vampire Killer has struck again or perhaps I have already missed the morning edition deadline. It will certainly be in the Evening Standard, and I will be able to get a good clipping from that. I find my press entertaining. I wonder what occupation they will come up with for this one. The police must have their work cut out for them coming up with plausible stories to cover the tracks of these 'murders'. They come up with names and occupations for all my kills, sometimes even interviewing the families that have been left behind! They will no doubt outdo themselves again with this one; I'm looking forward to pasting this clipping onto my wall.

The vampire goes to his window, a brave move given how close it is to sunrise, and he pulls the heavy velvet drapes closed. Once shut, no trace of light from outside penetrates. When he returns to his bed and turns off his lamp, the darkness is so complete that I can't even see my hand in front of my face.

Now I have to wait. I am thankful that it is dark now, and that he has finally gone to bed. Now I must wait until he falls asleep so I can finish what I came to do.

It doesn't take long; ten minutes perhaps, but no longer. His breathing becomes heavy and even, and finally I can stir from the closet. I have to work fast. I slide my backpack from my shoulders; inside is everything I require to kill a vampire. A stake that I have made especially for this kill; a heavy mallet, a torch, a bottle of holy water, and three full bulbs of garlic. Once I am out of the closet, I remove these items from my pack and turn on the torch. I approach the bed with my stake and mallet, and I find him lying on his back, his eyes closed and his arms lying slackly by his side.

It is rare to have such an open target. His chest is bare and perfectly presented to me, as though he is taunting me, convinced that I will not do it. But I will. I will position the stake above his heart, and I will strike true.

Where have I seen him before?

If he is like the other vampire's I have killed and I am fairly certain that he is he will probably thrash around a lot as he dies, he may even scream, but the blood loss will weaken him, and I will be able to finish the job quickly. Well, as quickly as killing someone with a wooden stake can be.

When I started on this path, five years ago, I was naïve and foolish. My experience of vampires came almost exclusively from film and television, and even with the course set out by Lord Roderick, I was hopelessly unprepared for the realities of killing. I imagined that driving a stake into the heart of the beast would be a simple matter; strike hard and true, the stake would plunge into the vampire's chest and he would die, falling away into dust. The truth is a very different manner. Those first kills were hard fought battles. Plunging a stake into the chest causes damage, but the body has an excellent defence against such attack: the rib cage. And almost always the vampire fights; they fight for their lives. Screaming like banshees, as though I am the evil one, and not them. I honed my technique, using the element of surprise to give me the advantage. It takes both hands to hammer that stake through the ribs and into the heart; and the stake must be sharp, the mallet heavy.

And now it is time to put an end to this creature. I put my torch on his bedside table, and hold the stake above his un-beating heart. I have the mallet raised high above my head, ready to strike with the force of a blacksmith hammering an anvil. He doesn't stir; his eyelids don't flicker, and the only sound I can hear is his calm breathing intermingled with my own ragged breaths. He looks so vulnerable. And then it comes to me; I know where I've seen him. He was a musician, or something like that, who disappeared years ago. I can remember the news reports; this is the same man!

Or was it? Perhaps it was just the vampire playing mind tricks again, another way of convincing me not to kill him. I blink, and I shake myself out of my stupor. I bring the mallet down hard.

The effect is immediate and terrible. I hear his breastbone crack, a sound like thick plated glass cracking in the cold, and the stake drives down through the layer of firm flesh and muscle; and I feel it glance off his ribs. The bones have broken, but I haven't reached the heart yet. His eyes shoot open, and he inhales a harsh gasping breath before screaming as I bring the mallet down again. The stake has found its mark at last, but although he is mortally wounded, but he is not dead yet. He thrashes violently in the bed, tearing at the covers and hitting his head against the heavy wooden bed head; and he screams, again, and again, and again. It is a terrible shrieking sound, ear splitting, and filled with agony and horror. His hands reach out, grasping desperately for salvation, and his fingers try to close around the front of my sweatshirt. I pull away before he can grab hold of me, not wanting him to touch me while in the throws of death. Blood is pouring out of him, and I perceive a change in the sound of his screams. They have taken on a gurgling sound, and he begins coughing up rancid clots of blood.

The screaming fades, and the decline sets in. His fingers claw at the bedclothes and a tear streaks down his cheek. I watch his face as he dies; I watch and I smile.

"Die," I spit at him, "die and return to whatever level of hell spawned you!"

The only sound that escapes him is the harsh gurgle of blood filling his lungs.

Then he stills, the strength leaving his body; and his eyes meet mine. I believe that he is repenting the decrepit state of his life, and that he is thanking me for delivering him from this eternal hell, but he can't speak the words; he has no words left. Finally, he falls silent. Dead.

This was an easy kill. I have had them fight harder and longer than this one. It was as though he wanted me to do it; to end his torment.

Now that he is dead, I am able to take time to linger over my work. He is at peace now, and I feel an overwhelming urge to touch him. I trace the tips of my fingers along his bloodied jaw. It really was a shame. He was such a pretty creature as far as vampires go. I have never lingered over a kill before, but I linger over him. 'He was just an animal,' I tell myself, 'a feral animal that needed to be destroyed; and it is my job to destroy them.'

He is already cold, which is odd, because the others never chill this fast. It is as though he is made of stone; as cold and as pale as marble.

I must pull myself away from him. He has made a lot of noise with his death, and a frightened neighbour has undoubtedly called the police.

I put the mallet away and remove the garlic bulbs from my pack. I must fill the wound, and his mouth, with the garlic, and then I must open the drapes and let the emerging sunshine in. He is dead, but I have to complete the task so that his soul can rest. I pull the stake from his chest, and it leaves his body with a wet, sucking noise. I wrap the stake in a clean, white tea towel that I have brought for this purpose. I return it gently to my backpack; when I get home I will add it to my collection; a reminder of the importance of the work I have undertaken. Then I begin to stuff the garlic into the wound, pushing it down deep into his chest.

And then he blinks.

I stop, hovering over him, my mind reeling. He has to be dead. He must be dead, it is impossible for him to be alive. He must be dead. I must have imagined the blink.

Even as I am thinking it, he begins to move. I back away, my limbs going numb with horror. I have staked him; I have destroyed his heart; I have packed his chest with garlic. There is no possible way he can be moving.

Yet he is. He shifts in the bed, moving his weight and his limbs, and then he sits up and stares at me. I start to shake my head in denial. This can't be happening. He can't be sitting there; he can't be flexing his fingers and rolling his head on a stiff neck; he can't be *smiling* at me.

"Die and return to whatever level of hell spawned you?" he says tritely. "A little melodramatic don't you think?"

I speak, but my voice is so high pitched that I can't hear myself.

He hears me, and he nods. "Of course I'm dead," he says sarcastically, mocking me by indicating the bloody hole in his chest.

"What..." I have to stop, clear my throat, and force my voice to work properly. "*What are you?*" I ask hoarsely.

He stands up, pulling a piece of garlic from the wound in his chest and discarding it with a look of disgust. "I'm a vampire, of course..." He glares at me and shakes his head, dropping another piece of gore covered garlic beside his bed. "Garlic?" he asks. "What's with the fucking garlic?"

"I had to make sure you stayed dead," I whisper.

"Then it would have been better to go for the windows," he replies. "Sunlight and fire are the only things that can kill a vampire oh, and total dismemberment. This staking business is a load of old bollocks."

"But... but I..." I don't know what I am trying to say; I'm still trying to understand how it is he is standing there talking to me. "I've killed hundreds of vampires," I manage at last, but I don't sound convincing.

"No," he corrected, "You have killed a lot of shift workers, and some hapless emo kids who spent a lot of time in nightclubs."

I don't understand him. This is my calling. I have never slain an innocent, only vampires. *He is wrong.*

"You are exactly what the newspapers say you are," he tells me as he continues to pull pieces of garlic out of the hole in his chest, dropping them on the floor. "*You're mad.*"

"But you are a..."

He laughs at me, as though I'm an idiot. "Yeah, ironic isn't it? You've managed to find a real vampire at last." He looks down at his chest and shakes his head. "If it's any consolation, this hurts like fucking hell."

"You should be dead."

He gets impatient with me and growls, long and low, like an animal. "Staking me is not going to kill me," he says, "and the garlic myth is just ridiculous *it's a vegetable for gods sake*. Crucifixes and holy water don't affect me either, in case that was your next option. And who started that whole 'no reflection' thing?" he asks me. "How insane is that?"

I have found myself dumbstruck; no matter how hard I try, I can't find any words. I glance at the curtains. What time is it? Is the sun up yet? *have to let the light in.* I have to kill him.

But he is on me before I can move, and I am falling before I realise that he has won.

"Now this might hurt a bit," he tells me, and he smiles a brilliant smile. I see it, a flash of sharp white teeth and bright green eyes.

I always knew it would be beautiful.