

# No Such Thing

By J. Reyome

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It is a beautiful night, and life is sweet.

Our family have just returned from trick-or-treating, and now we are all in the basement of our home gathered around the television set, on which is playing the Tod Browning version of *Dracula*, an old favorite of ours. The twins are on the rug sorting their Halloween swag, while our youngest, Sunny, is sprawled across the laps of my wife and I. To me it looks as if the child should be uncomfortable, she is twisted so, but she doesn't seem to mind. My left leg is falling asleep beneath her, but I endure it as cheerily as a good father should.

Joanne, my wife, catches my eye. She is staring with those dark, dark eyes of hers, a brown so thick as to be chocolate, dark chocolate, mixed with tiny pale-blue flecks of what must be mint. They are amazing.

She smiles, rubs my leg. I must've been fidgeting. "Sunny, be a dear and let your Daddy have his leg back," she says to our daughter.

Sunny yawns, sits up, and smiles sleepily up at me. She is a gorgeous little girl, not quite four years old, and she seems to have been blessed with the best features of both Joanne and I. The eyes of her mother, my chin and mouth, Joanne's fine, high cheekbones, and the vividly blonde hair of my youth. I expect she will go grey prematurely as did I, and when she does, she will be even more amazing to look at with a full head of silver hair, much as her mother looked when I first met her.

The swelling music of the film catches her attention and she looks away, only to look back a moment later. She says something I don't catch at first. I ask her to repeat it, and as soon as she does, I wish that she hadn't.

What she said, in her ordinarily charming four year old chirp, was, "*Da, s'dere reely bampize?*" Which translates from toddler as, *Da* (for she calls me "Da") *is there really vampires?*

My blood runs cold, and the memories of a night just seven years previous return.

It was raining in Springville that night. Of course, I didn't know it at the time; it had been gorgeous when I'd gone underground. It was one of those wonderful fall days you just wish would last forever, China-blue skies dotted with cotton wool cumulous, temperatures in the mid to high 80s. Oh, it was a bit humid, but that was okay; it gave me that much more incentive to get my ass underground rather than go to the town park courts and play basketball,

which was my other obsession back in the day. Hoops and caving. Basketball was the reason I'd come to southern Indiana, to attend school at IU and maybe get a walk-on shot with the legendary Hoosiers. The latter went about as far as you might expect for a 27 year old freshman—finances dictating a late start to my college career—but dreams die hard and if nothing else I can at least say I have scrimmaged at Assembly Hall, which is pretty neat.

But I digress. To begin at the beginning, we had found a cave, the "we" being myself and Trey Neary, my roommate, landlord, and best friend, and we called it called it Hollering Heaton's Horror Hole, or 4H Cave. 4H was a small opening in a shallow sinkhole on the property of one Zeb Heaton, who'd told us he'd shouted into it once and heard an echo but was too scared to crawl in, thus the grandiose name. We checked it, and found that it produced a large plume of steam on cold mornings, pretty much a guarantee that there was something cavernous down there somewhere. But it required some labor before it would pay off...the sinkhole obviously took in a lot of water, and over the centuries a lot of dirt had washed into the opening. Trey and I were reasonably certain there was a sizeable cave inside, but we would have to dig for it.

Now, it is a long process, digging out a cave. Working conditions are dirty, tight and miserable—despite the chill breeze, it is so humid, you can't work but a few minutes before you are drenched in sweat. If you work in pairs, you have someone to haul out the tailings, but alone, which was usually how we worked, you have to do it yourself and it takes forever. Still, we made steady progress, and over the course of a month's efforts we managed to push forward exactly 214 grueling feet.

You think of a lot of things when you are doing such awful, otherwise mindless work alone. Probably it crosses your mind from time to time that there's always a chance you might be squarshed by some great slab of limestone that might come free, pulverizing your head, or torso, or whatever; usually when that sort of thought came over me, I would conclude something patently obvious like, *yes, that would really suck*, and then I would keep digging. Mostly though, I thought about how miserable I was.

Personally, I mean. Not in the hole. The digging I did purely because I had nothing else to do, and besides, it was entertaining in a loopy sort of way. No, what I mused on was how pathetic my life had become, in that spending endless hours troweling out mud was the height of my existence. Oh, caving was okay, and I really enjoyed it, but occasionally one must surface, and that's when the problems would come to the forefront.

My Dad is a pretty smart guy, and he had told me once, "You can't spend your life playing pickup basketball and crawling around in caves. Eventually you're going to have to decide what to do with the rest of your life."

And he was right, of course. I sure couldn't have gone on long the way things were. It wasn't so much that money was always tight (though it certainly was) more than the boredom and the solitude. I didn't have any close friends besides Trey, and he was a psycho by anyone's standards. I probably wasn't any different from any other guy my age, but I was desperately lonely...the girls at IU weren't any different that they had been in at home: they knew a likely loser when they saw one, and they tended to shy away whenever I appeared. That I was older than them didn't help, and that I *looked* older only made it worse. And the more depressed I got, the worse I looked, because I wasn't taking care of myself very well. Okay, at all.

It was the purest of coincidences that the caving took me in something of a constructive direction. Mostly for our own amusement Trey and I did a fairly comprehensive abstract on the area in which we had been working, and one evening we ended up presenting it at an IUSC (that's IU Spelunking Club, if you're keeping score at home) meeting. To our immense surprise, once the club officers realized we were serious about what we'd been doing, they actually accepted us into their confidence, turning us on to a couple of locations even we hadn't considered. That didn't mean we shared *everything* with them; 4H remained a closely guarded secret.

The new alliances we formed did have some interesting results though, not the least of which was that people would actually speak to us at meetings. Another was that I was, errr, *invited*, to change my major to from English to Hydrology, which I was only too happy to do, as I was becoming bored of English. Now, anything ending in 'ology' was bound to be a sort of a strange major for me, as I have never been very scientifically inclined, but it was so intertwined with caving that it was already something of a hobby with me, and as it was, I had a graduate thesis pretty much underway. Besides, it suited me. I couldn't see any downside, except maybe that jobs are even more scarce for hydrologists than they are for English majors. Still, I made the move, and I didn't regret it. I still don't.

Anyway. Trey kept on with the digging at 4H. He was maniacal about it, and had pushed through a crushingly tight bedrock squeeze at the end of our dig into what looked like going cave beyond...good news, except that he told me, almost smugly, that it was too tight for me. Not being keen on finding out just *how*tight it was, I decided my best option would be hiking the land to the west of Zeb Heaton's place, looking for something, anything, that might be an easier way into the cave we guessed had to be draining this area. It wouldn't be much fun, walking overland with no promise of finding anything, but this was all in the name of Science, which still had some meaning to us, so I checked out a GPS from the club stash (another nice perk to membership) and I got busy. And right away I struck paydirt.

Oh, it was a long walk, to be sure. I could hardly have imagined a more obscure location: deep in the woods, so remote that as I worked my way down a gentle slope into a perfectly secluded valley that I left a trail—bits of flagging tape tied to tree limbs—behind me so I could find my way back. Eventually I worked myself through a final dense thicket into a clearing in which stood a rambling sort of house. It wasn't in disrepair, but it didn't exactly look lived-in either. Still, there were power and phone lines going to it, and as I walked up I noted the wheel in the meter box revolving. Slowly, but it was moving. Something in there was using power.

I tried the front door, politely at first and then progressively more firmly when I didn't get a response. Finally I gave up and went to the back door and repeated the process...with the same result. As I walked around the building, I noted that the basement windows appeared to be either incredibly dirty, or they were painted black, and from the inside. Funny.

So. Somebody lived there, and they owned a car—I could see it through the filthy windows of the garage attached to the house—but if they were at home, they weren't answering the door. And they were fanatics for privacy. I understood that well enough. I had to...when you live in a house with seven other guys and share a room with somebody like Trey Leary, you learn to knock, and you hope they do too. Not that I'd ever had an instance to require that kind of solitude, but Trey certainly had, and I'd caught a couple a couple of the others at less than their best. Such is college life when you're barely able to afford your books, let alone your 14.2 percent of the rent. Oh, and food.

I gave up looking for the resident and decided instead to have a look around. The USGS topo map I carried showed a sinking stream in the vicinity, so I figured that was as good a place as any to start. And finish, as it turned out. It's usually not so simple, but I guess I lucked out: I walked right to it from the house, and right away I knew I had something of substance. It was a narrow crevice penetrating a dry creekbed which was scoured by repeated washings of floodwater, a lot of which appeared to have poured straight down into the very crevice into which I was peering. It looked very active and very flood-prone...nothing I wanted to be messing with during rainy season, but this was fall, not normally a season we tend to see much rain. I soon donned my denim jacket, gloves, and helmet and was happily clambering down into the hole.

It was awkward but not overly tight. What did give me pause was the drop to the floor below...I let myself down three times before I felt sure enough I'd be able to get back out before I touched down.

When I finally got my cave eyes and looked around, I was perfectly tickled. I'd entered just to the side of a stream passage perhaps fifteen feet

across and eight feet high at its largest. The water was about six inches to a foot high and mostly lay in an incised channel on the floor. It wasn't the great roaring river all cavers hope to find, but it was a flowing stream nonetheless, and with plenty of evidence of greater flow during periods of high water. In fact, there was organic debris stuck in cracks on the ceiling, so the passage probably filled completely during heavy rains. I sure didn't want to be there to confirm it. As far as I knew it was virgin, and as such, it was a pretty important discovery.

Now...where was I? I figured I'd walked about a mile and a half from the 4H entrance. If the two were connected, it would be a pretty good-sized cave right off the bat. So I headed upstream, in what I figured was the general direction of 4H. A thousand feet, then two...the ceiling height lowering gradually as I went on till I was walking stooped. Another thousand feet. Now it was starting to get obnoxious. It was too high to crawl but too low to stoop. Figuring I might be close enough that Trey might hear me, I called his name. If he was still working he might be nearby somewhere.

There was no response, but then the passage had branched several times, and the connection to 4H, if there was there one, could be in any one of the connecting passages. I turned around, retraced my steps to the entrance, and then ran downstream at least another thousand feet, and the passage got bigger, and bigger, and *bigger*...and then it wasn't fair to call it merely a passage, it was gargantuan in scale, bigger than anything I'd seen in my short caving career. The enormous room in which I turned around, in fact, looked like it could swallow the whole of Assembly Hall, and still have room for a practice court. Or two. I still thought a lot in hoops terms then, you see. It was astonishing.

Basketball quickly lost its status. Discoveries like this don't come often, I am told, and I was overwhelmed. In fact, I hardly remember making my way back to the entrance, and I certainly don't remember singing in joy as I climbed out. But later, I was told that I had...

I suppose it was understandable. I do recall that as I sat on the dry bed collecting my thoughts and catching my breath, I could hardly contain a grin. I looked back down into the maw of the cave, shaking my head.

The sun had gone down. That was a surprise. I couldn't have imagined I'd been in the cave that long, but, time flies, I guess, and that's pretty much what I was thinking when I realized that I was being watched.

Even now I can't describe what I heard, and I wondered later if I had just imagined it all. But I was sure I at least *felt* the presence of something near, something that was watching me. Not threatening, not approaching, but watching. From where, I couldn't be sure; every time I felt like I had a fix on a

direction, I would look, and just as promptly I would sense something from another tangent, something that wasn't...natural?

If not natural, then *unnatural*. Certainly not human, fish or fowl, mammal, amphibian. It definitely gave me a serious case of the creeps, and more for my own reassurance, I called out: "Is someone there?"

If someone *was*, they didn't feel inclined to reply.

"I'm not here to do anything but explore this cave," I explained nervously, pointing into the hole, "and I'm done now, so I'll be on my way...thank you for allowing me to be here, and I hope you'll let me come back again." Again, I had no idea who or what I was addressing, but I figured being polite couldn't hurt.

It wasn't far back to the road, and I made haste too. When I got there I found Trey waiting at the appointed spot...fast asleep. I had to hammer on the window to wake him. When he finally let me in, he allowed as to the fact that he'd been waiting for nearly three hours and what the hell had took me so long. I told him I'd been looking for a better way into the cave. And apparently we'd need it too: it seems that he'd arrived at the entrance to 4H and found it mostly refilled with washed-in silt from rains the past week. Some of it was easily passed, he insisted, but the worst of it would have to be re-dug, which would, at least for me, mean re-excavating *all* of it. Not good news.

Oh well. That wasn't so crucial now so far as I was concerned. I kept my news from him for the time being. He'd been smugly secretive regarding the progress of his exploration in 4H beyond the bedrock squeeze, so I figured it would be more than okay for me to return the favor. We drove back to Bloomington, made plans to return the next weekend, and on that appointed day, we returned to Springville, in separate cars, this time. I was well-equipped for a longer stay underground this time, and I clandestinely carried survey gear so I could go get a fix for where the cave was heading.

Between the GPS and my flagged trail I walked right to the cave and, leaving the GPS in the crook of a tree, I promptly made my way upstream where I'd planned to spend several hours waiting for Trey to come through, occasionally hollering to see if I could get him to respond, wherever he might be. Naturally, it didn't work out quite that way. We'd both been cramming for finals and neither of us was at our best. Eventually I fell asleep after a couple of hours, curled up on a mud bank like it was a feather bed.

I woke about four hours later, and even then only because I was half submerged in water. Warm water, which meant it was pouring in from the surface.

This was bad, very bad. The passage between me and the entrance was low in places, and the water was high and swift. On the plus side, I was going with the flow, but were I to be swept downstream past the

entrance...well, I didn't want to find out how that ended. I made very sure that when I thought I was within a hundred meters of the crack in the ceiling that I placed my steps very, very carefully. Even so, when I finally did get there, I damned near blew right past it, because darkness had fallen on the surface in the meantime, making the narrow opening that much harder to spot. I saw it just in time and somehow managed to heave myself out and onto a dry bed that was anything but. Imagine forcing yourself *up* a swirling drain, and you've got a pretty good idea what it was like. When I dragged myself up onto the bank I was thoroughly soaked. Clean, but drenched, like I'd been just been through a rinse cycle. Exhausted too, and minus my pack, which I'd abandoned in the passage below; I just didn't think it was so important as I was trying to shove myself up that crack. Funny how your priorities change when you figure you're about to die...the contents of that pack were worth a few hundred dollars. But I did remember to retrieve the GPS, and thanked my lucky stars that I didn't have to pay to replace *that*.

Still, the pack had contained my car keys and my cell phone. The latter was pre-pay, of course, the only kind I could afford to carry; it could be replaced. So could the keys, but that wasn't much consolation on the long, cold walk back to the parking spot. And if Trey wasn't there waiting for me...what what I do then?

Naturally, he wasn't, and I stood there next to the road for a long time, teeth chattering—it had grown very cold—and weighed my options. I could wait, risking hypothermia, or I could see if I could locate a house in the area and see if they'd let me make a call, perhaps to Trey's cell, if nothing else letting him know I'd surfaced. Or I could walk back to 4H and see if he was still there, maybe his car had failed to start. That wasn't entirely unheard of.

Or...

I didn't want to think of the possibility of Trey still being in 4H. That would be bad, very bad. The passage was tight, and probably it funneled water in from a fairly large surface area. The weather hadn't looked bad at all when we'd split up, so surely he'd gone to the face of the dig and had set himself up for a long day's work, just as I had. Maybe he'd fallen asleep just like me, and if he had, his chances of getting out were infinitely worse than mine might've been.

So there really was only one option. I had to go to the closest house, and that happened to be that of the probable owner of the dry-bed entrance. I would call Trey's number, and if he didn't answer, I'd call the house, and if he wasn't *there*, then I would call Cave Rescue, for what would likely be a body recovery...

So that was why I knocked so vigorously on the door of the house when I finally did make my way there in what had become a driving rainstorm. It was

epic, and chances were I would've loved it had I not been so much a part of it...the rain was coming down in sheets so thick they were like impenetrable ebony curtains flecked with quicksilver. I had no light but the mini-Mag I kept around my neck on a lanyard, and that wasn't much good in this kind of torrent, but holding it was at least a small comfort as lightning crashed around me.

I hammered on the front door several minutes before reluctantly giving up the shelter of the awning to try around the back. I got no answer there either, but by now my dread had reached newly-plumbed depths and I was preparing to knock out a pane of glass in the door and try and force my way in. That was when I chanced to look down and spied a key that water rushing out a downspout had forced from its hiding place beneath a large rock next to the stoop. I picked it up, tried it in the lock, and was relieved to find that it worked and a moment later I was standing, dripping, in what my light revealed to be one of the dirtiest kitchens I'd ever stepped into.

Dirty. Now, I ought to define that. I don't mean dirty as in, dishes everywhere, bugs, trash, discarded fast-food wrappers, that sort of thing. Rather like the kitchen I shared at the house. No, the room in which I stood might've been pristine but for an accumulation of dust that had to be seen to be believed, and I'm talking what appeared to be several decades' worth. But that wasn't so important, not to me, not just then...especially when I began to feel that unseen stare again.

"Hello?" I called nervously. "I'm sorry, I don't want to do anything but use your phone." I'd seen the wires the other day, remember, so I figured there was at least a connection, and power as well, so hopefully..."That's all I want," I shouted, "just to use the phone, I swear. I'll leave as soon as I make my call." I wanted to make my intentions clear, lest somebody be standing behind a door with a shotgun. Hey, this is rural America we're talking about here.

The phone didn't hold out much promise, being one of the old rotary-dial type, but it emitted a reassuring dial tone when I picked it up, so I dialed Trey's cell number and stood there for a moment, growing more apprehensive with each ring he didn't pick up...until, finally, he *did*.

Trey always did have a flair for using swear words creatively, and he was in rare form now. He graphically described what it was like to be a turd trying to work its way out of a constantly-flushing commode. "Because that's what it was like," he insisted. "I about didn't make it out of there. There was so much water coming in, the last hundred feet was pretty much a dive."

Ghastly stuff. Worse than what I'd been through, and I told him so. "But we're both okay. That's the important part."



"Maybe," he said morosely, "but we're probably never going to get to see where all that water's going."

I grinned. "Maybe. Or maybe not. I may have found something. If we're lucky, we may even have permission by then. I hope so, anyway. I'm in the house right now."

"No kidding! What are they like?"

"Don't know, I haven't seen anybody yet. It's awful dusty, but the phone works. You going to come out this way and get me?"

He laughed. "Yeah, right. Listen, we got a couple of problems here. First, the car's hosed. Literally. Popped a radiator hose. Me and Mark are working on it, but it'll be a while." A couple of caver friends lived in Springville and ran a takeaway pizza place. "Then, the road's mostly impassable between you and Springville. I managed to walk here to the Pizza Barn. If you start right now, you might get here before they close." There was a pause, then some obvious sounds of chewing. Obviously he was being fed. Also, he was probably warm, and if need be, he had somewhere to spend the night. I found myself hating him very, very profoundly.

My stomach growled right about then. "You're a prince, Trey," I remarked sourly.

"Uh huh. Kristi said she'll save you some pizza. Might be cold though."

And that was that. The connection dropped. Evidently I had been dismissed. I gently hung up the phone.

And then I froze. I'd heard a click when I hung up the phone, but it wasn't the gentle *snick* of a receiver being laid on a cradle. No, this was more like a hammer being cocked. It was followed quickly by another sinister 'clack'.

Very, very slowly I raised my hands.

"All I wanted was to use the phone," I said in as non-menacing a tone as I could muster. "I'll leave right now."

"And how do I know you won't come back?"

A woman's voice. And it didn't sound at all frightened, not nearly as frightened as I was.

I figured being forthright might be the best tack. "Well, honestly, I'd *like* to come back, to visit your cave. I've come by before hoping someone was at home. This is the first time I've ever found anyone."

"I don't own a cave."

"If your property includes the dry stream bed just west of this house, yes, you do. A pretty impressive one too."

There was a moment of silence, then I heard her sigh. It didn't sound exasperated at all, or even relieved. Resigned, maybe, in retrospect, considering what she said next. "I suppose I won't be shed of you anytime

soon then. Keep your hands up and turn around, please. I want to see what I'm dealing with."

Of course I complied. I found myself looking, dimly, at rather an attractive, if pale lady, I guessed maybe in mid-to-late forties, possibly early fifties. Her hair was very light and long...it was either very blonde or very gray, in the dim light I couldn't tell which. Apart from that, the only thing I could clearly see was that she wearing a Hoosiers Basketball t-shirt, of which I nodded approvingly. "I hoped I'd play for them someday, you know," I said, trying to make pleasant conversation. She still had the gun leveled on me, after all.

"Never you mind that," she said in an annoyed tone. "I want you to clean up the mess you're making on my floor."

My voice must've betrayed my surprise. "Ma'am, much as I do appreciate you not ventilating me, I think anything I might do to clean your floor would be like putting lipstick on a pig, if you know what I mean."

That was when she raised the shotgun and took aim. "That's bold talk for somebody with two barrels pointing at him."

"And if you pull that trigger, you'll get a face full of stock, the way you're holding it," I pointed out. "If you want me to leave, I'll go, and if you don't want anyone to come back, well, we won't. Nobody knows anything about that cave but me, and I can make sure nobody ever does."

Slowly she lowered the shotgun. "I heard what you said," she murmured with a welcome note of concern. "Was it as bad as all that out there?"

"The cave or the rain?"

She shrugged. "Both, I guess."

I nodded. "They were both pretty bad. I'm glad to be dry, at any rate."

"Well, you're not. Maybe you ought to come downstairs and get into some dry clothes."

Her face didn't betray any ulterior motives. Besides, I was cold and she knew it. And perhaps accepting her hospitality would be a good 'in' for future trips. "Well, that's fine. Great," I said. "Point the way."

Her weapon in a safe position, she ushered me down a flight of stone steps which soon turned into wood, which in turn led onto a surprisingly spacious and wide hardwood floor.

Spacious, wide, and...clean. Spotlessly clean, as clean as the upstairs had been dirty. "You live down here," I observed brightly, looking around.

"You didn't think I lived up *there*, did you?" She motioned to my left. "The shower is in there. Toss your clothes in the bin and I'll run them through the wash if you like." I was about to protest when she held up a pale hand. "No, don't. It's the least I can do for pointing a shotgun at you." She smiled shyly. "In the meantime I'll get you something you can wear till they're done."

I didn't figure on this sort of hospitality, but then I wasn't exactly in any place to refuse it, and even if I had been I wouldn't have been inclined. I thanked her and went in to the shower, which was bathroom, which was clean, warm, and well-appointed, with a shower that was of the walk-in variety and thus a complete delight. Mind you, a hose and a sprayer would've been acceptable as cold as I was. So I stood and I soaked for several minutes, and I enjoyed the warmth and the wonderful, soapy smell of the space, which I computed as warm vanilla with just the faintest hint of woman...

...and then I felt the weight of the eyes again. The same feeling I'd felt upstairs, the same I'd felt the other day sitting in the cave entrance. Like I was being watched—no, stared at—by something, I couldn't tell who or what, or whether the intent was sinister or benign or merely curious. But somehow I knew I was being observed. I didn't sense any hostility, so I figured there was nothing to do but finish what I was doing and get out.

I hadn't heard her enter or leave, but when I came out of the shower I found a robe and a pair of terry lounge pants folded neatly on the commode. They certainly hadn't been there when I went in to the shower. What's more, they were warm, like they'd just come out of the dryer. They smelled good too, that faintly vanilla scent that seemed to pervade the place. It was...well, nice, and more than a bit evocative...I could close my eyes and imagine walking hand in hand with someone (her, perhaps?) through sunny fields...blowing dandelions and watching their seeds scatter as dragonflies hummed past busily...

Like I said, evocative. But the reverie didn't last long. The room was chilly, even coming out of a hot shower, so I dried off and donned the clothes quickly and walked outside, the cold floor making me wish she'd remembered socks too.

She had, apparently, because just then she was placing a pair on the coffee table in front of the leather sofa that dominated the room. "Sorry," she said hastily. "I remembered everything else. I just hope it all fits. You're about Toni's size."

"Please, there's no need to apologize," I replied gratefully. "I'm just happy to be warm and dry. It's pretty awful out there, and it's even worse underground."

She smiled. "I'd glad you're okay." She sat and patted a place on the sofa next to her. "Here. I've got a kettle on for some cocoa, or tea if you'd like."

I sat beside her. Apparently she'd changed while I was in the shower, and now she was in a white peignoir, something billowy and wonderful. She was close too, perhaps a bit too close for my liking. It wasn't as if she were unattractive—quite the opposite, in fact—but I have always been socially awkward. Besides, I didn't even know her name yet, though she promptly

solved that little dilemma by introducing herself. "I'm Joanne Heaton," she said, holding out her hand.

I took it. It seemed small and rather cold, but I guessed that was what one got living in a basement. "I'm Mark, Mark Allyn. Are you any kin to Zeb Heaton?"

"Zebulon? Why, he's my...my Uncle." She instantly went from pleased to uncomfortable and back, and I was sure she had mouthed, *my brother*, before abruptly changing tack. "He's a character, isn't he? How has he been? I haven't seen him in years."

That was strange too. Why would she live so close, a stone's throw, and not see her Uncle? And funny, Zeb hadn't mentioned having any kin nearby.

Still, she been a perfect host so far, and I had no reason to doubt her. Better, she didn't come off as pushy or threatening...a far cry from your average cave owner in southern Indiana, who tended to be a pretty suspicious lot. Considering the variety of cavers who might come calling I don't suppose that should be at all surprising, but there you go.

"Well, between you, you own quite a big cave," I told her, changing the topic. "It may be the largest around here, and that would be saying a lot." I described what I'd seen, comparing it to the likes of beautiful Shiloh Cave, massive Sullivan, long and wet Blue Springs, even Lost River, which was likely the longest cave in the state. "But you never know," I told her. "For all I know it could end around the next bend past that last big room I was in." I shivered involuntarily. "I reckon it's a good thing I didn't go any farther. I might not have gotten back."

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asked. "You didn't get hurt or anything down there, did you?" It was sweet, now she seemed genuinely concerned. Typical woman, I figured, hot to cold to warm in nothing flat.

"Oh, I got beat up a little bit. Not any more than usual. Some bruises, some cuts. But that happens when you go caving."

She stood as a faint whine indicated her kettle had boiled. "Just a minute, Mark. Tea or cocoa?"

"Whatever you're having is fine."

She left and came back with two steaming mugs. "I thought cocoa would be more appropriate. It *is* Halloween, after all, and I don't get many trick-or-treaters." She laughed, but it was a humorless sound. "I don't get *any* trick-or-treaters, actually, unless they come to soap my windows or write nasty words on the house." And for a moment she looked angry, and then it turned to a peculiar sadness. Then that look vanished, veiled by a smile that made her look years younger.

Funny. I'd guessed she was in her mid-to-late forties, but the more I looked, I realized I was wrong. She was probably closer to forty, maybe more

but not by much. Also, she was pretty, prettier than I might've guessed from a distance.

The contrast led to conflict. She was probably not the sort of woman I would be seen with, or perhaps would be seen with *me* would be putting it better. She was...well, *elegant* would be the best word I could think of. Refined, perhaps. Glamorous. Well above my station at any rate, pleasant to look at and delightful to be near. Oh, and she smelled good too, the same smell I'd noticed on the robe. Nice.

I will try to describe her as I saw her then. She was slender; not gaunt, but there was no excess flesh on her, not that I could see, and what I could see was nicely shaped. Her skin was pale, yes, almost ivory, but it didn't look unnatural, at least in the light of the room. And her hair was not blonde, nor was it gray. It was *silver*. I would like to repeat that so it's not mistaken: that is *silver*, not gray or white. It was amazing, really. I'd never seen the likes, before or since. I might've thought she was albino but for that, and that she didn't have the pinkish eye color either, the irises being instead of a marvelous shade of gray. The combination of her hair and eyes and admittedly pale complexion combined with her almost regal bearing made her a striking woman to look at, and for the first time in my life I found myself utterly smitten, to the point of foolishness.

With something of an awestruck tone I told her, "I hope this doesn't offend you, and don't take this the wrong way, but I think you're the most amazing-looking woman I have ever met." I tend to say foolish things when I am overcome, and I was nothing if not overcome by her.

But she indulged me with a warm smile and laid a cool hand on my own. "What way *should* I take a statement like that, Mark?" Her gaze went down to our hands and then back at me. "No, don't answer. I know, I'm unusual. It's all to do with my condition. I'm subject to photoallergic dermatoses. It's genetic, but only certain members of the...family, as it were, are affected by it. Ultimately what it means is that I'm hyper-sensitive to the sun and I don't go out much during the day and not at all unless I'm completely covered. If I'm exposed at all..." She shuddered. "It can get quite ugly. How it affects pigmentation, I don't know. The hair, I'm not so sure of that, but it may be a recessive gene. Funny, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure about funny. Tragic, I'd say. How do you deal with it?"

Her hand was still on mine, I noticed. Or, I should say, I noticed when she started to stroke my hand gently.

"I don't leave here often," she said softly, looking down at our hands. "Not during the day. When I do, it's only because I have to. You can only do so much shopping after dark. I rely on Toni—Anton, he calls himself now—to help me out with that." There was a less-than-faint disdain in the last

sentence. "My husband. Or rather, ex-husband. We've been...separated for some time. There were never any papers filed, but as far as I'm concerned, he's no longer interested in me." She raised her hand from mine, motioned around us, then it returned to its stroking. "He provides me with this. That's something, I suppose. And he...supports me, so to speak." She looked at me curiously. "When I first saw you, I thought maybe he'd sent you. You don't know him, do you?"

"I don't know any Antons," I told her. "Or Tonys, besides Soprano, and the pizza company. And my brother-in-law, but somehow I don't think we'd be talking about the same guy."

"Surely not," she said with a smile. "But it wouldn't be the first time Anton's sent someone here. He tries to...what do they say these days, set me up?"

I nodded. "Like a blind date."

She laughed dryly. "I suppose you could call it that. So, when I saw you, I thought that's what you were here for." Again her hand left mine, this time to motion toward the windows. "I have to have them blacked out, for obvious reasons. But there's just enough of a peephole on each side that I can look out in just about every direction." She sighed. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself. I wanted to call to you, but..." Now her hands raised in the air in a gesture of futile wanting. "I so wish I could go outside, feel what it's like to be *warm* again." Her eyes began to glisten. "I wasn't always like this, Mark. When I was younger..."

She leaned toward me, and, as uncomfortable as I was, I didn't have the heart to refuse her an embrace. It was pitiful, the situation she was in, and I reckon my own solitary nature wasn't a whole lot different, except that my solitude was self-enforced.

Cold. She was cold. I held her tighter, and she molded herself to me. It was disturbingly comfortable, and it would've been appealing except for her chill, and for my hesitancy. She was quite a bit older than me, after all, and I knew nothing about her. Except, of course, that she'd taken me in from out of the cold and damp, let me use her shower, dressed me in her husband's robe, and had my own clothes in the washer. This wasn't something that happened every day.

"You're so...so...warm," she murmured, her lips against my neck, evoking a river of gooseflesh that started at the back of my neck and quickly spread over the rest of my body. "I don't care why you're here, Mark, but I'm glad you came." She sighed again, and her breath was a moist, chill puff against my chest. "Would you stay a while? Please?"

"I...I can't think of anywhere I have to be," I said, adding, "And I can't imagine anywhere nicer to spend an evening, or finer company."

Her face, pressed to my chest, formed a happy smile. "Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you so very much. You don't know how much this means." I think maybe I do, I thought, smiling.

It was a delightful evening. We sat and watched monster movies, *Frankenstein*, *The Wolf Man*, and finally the original Tod Browning version of *Dracula*—it was Halloween, after all—and munched popcorn and sipped cocoa and later, a glass of wine. And we talked and talked. I don't know when I've ever had such a good time, and before the night was over, I had pretty much decided that she was the most wonderful person it'd even been my good fortune to meet. And I was looking at her differently, not so much as a host but as, perhaps, someone I might, ummm, *see socially*, as my Mom used to quaintly say. Sure, Joanne was older than me, significantly even, but so what? And wasn't it funny that, the longer I was around her, the younger she looked?

We ended up discussing the finer points of the Universal creatures. I professed my fondness for the *Wolf Man*. She laughed and told me I was predictably male. "It's the 'lone wolf' thing," she asserted. You men all think alike. You claim you crave solitude. Well, let me tell you something Mark, and this is a fact: most of you wouldn't last a day without a woman to keep you in harness. Believe me, you are *not* Lawrence Talbot, or his alter ego."

"Really?" I snickered, but good-naturedly. "Which one am I, then?"

She smiled. "Oh, you have some wolf in you, to be sure. But I see you more as the *Frankenstein* creature. Big, strong, good-hearted, misunderstood." She squeezed my hand gently. "And that's all you really want, is someone who understands you, and can love you for what you are."

I was flabbergasted, but I tried not to show it. She had pretty much nailed me shut, right there. "All right then, so which are you?"

She watched the screen. Right about then, Bela Lugosi as Count *Dracula* was stalking Lucy Weston (Westenra in the book, but never mind) as played by Frances Dade. "I think I'd be a female version of the Count," she declared. "Or maybe more like Gloria Holden in *Dracula's Daughter*, only without the creepy outfits. I would be a very stylish vampire. I would be both irresistible and beautiful."

I had to admit that she knew her horror flicks. As for the irresistibly beautiful part, well, I thought she was already at least that, and to her delight I told her so. "But vampires are evil," I added, "and I just can't see you as evil."

"What makes you think they *have* to be evil? Maybe they're just like *you*...misunderstood."

"I suppose," I allowed, "but look. See what he's doing?" I pointed to the screen, where the Count was about to take a bite out of the doomed Lucy.

"He's going after the babe. You'd think that if he had a conscience, he'd be, oh, I don't know, picking out people past their prime, or killing animals or something. It just seems so...immoral."

She burst out laughing. "Immoral! Oh, that's rich! Be honest with me, my Mark." There was an odd edge to her mirth, but it was muted by her naming me *her* Mark...that did not pass unnoticed. "If you were in his place, what would you do?" She pointed to the screen. "Would you settle for a deer, or a rabbit, or a skunk? Or would you nibble Lucy's neck? If it were me, I know what *I'd* do. I'd find the choicest, sweetest neck I could find, and I would positively go to town." She leaned into me provocatively. "And might I add, *dah-ling*, that you have an amazingly attractive neck?"

I think that I blushed at that. "No I don't."

"Oh, but you do." And she proved she was serious...by kissing said neck, and letting her tongue linger on it, long enough to raise another wave of gooseflesh. Seeing me shudder, she gave a throaty chuckle of delight. "Oh Mark," she sighed, "I'm so pleased you're comfortable around me. I know it must be awkward."

Well, it hadn't been, but now it was...but in the nicest possible way. "It's not so bad, believe me," I said. "It's not exactly as if I was real high on the dating list for IU coeds."

"They don't know what they're missing. I don't know that I've been so happy to be near someone in years."

I wondered, just who would she have to compare me to? Her ex-husband, I supposed, but the more I heard of him, the less I liked him. She'd told me he'd left her for a younger woman. I told her that snow on the roof didn't mean there wasn't a fire in the hearth, and she'd giggled and kissed me again. Already this one evening I'd had more kissing than I'd had in the past five years. And I had to admit, I liked it.

So I said to her, "Where have you been all my life, Joanne Heaton? You are an amazing lady, and I'm truly fortunate to have found you."

Her response was to hug me so tightly, I thought she might break a rib on one or the other of us.

"But listen," I added, shivering, "I don't want to kill the mood or anything, but I'm awfully cold. And it's getting late. Maybe I ought to head home and sit in a bath a while. I could come back tomorrow, if you have some free time...maybe..."

She looked up at me, her uncanny gray eyes wide. "Maybe?"

I thought it over. It was strange, this whole situation, but at the same time, I couldn't exactly deny what I was feeling. And yes, things had happened with amazing rapidity, and yes, she was older...though, strangely, now the



difference seemed even less pronounced. Or maybe I was just seeing her through different eyes. Eyes that cared.

Cared. Yes. Maybe that was it. Maybe I actually *cared* about somebody.

She was still staring at me though, and now I noticed the little flecks of blue intermingled with the gray, a light, almost sky blue, as vivid a blue as the gray they swam in was itself striking. "Maybe...?" she prompted again.

"Well, I thought that maybe...I mean, if you wanted to, I mean...I could...come by after dark, pick you up...I have a car...well, such as it is..." I hated to have anyone see my old Cavalier, it stuttered and stammered worse than I was right now, "...but maybe...maybe we could go out, I could take you out for dinner, maybe see a movie..." I let my voice trail off, which was probably a good thing, as I was starting to sound a little silly about then.

"That's very sweet," she murmured. "But Mark, you're here *right now*. I would love to fix you dinner. Or, perhaps, breakfast..." She stood, held out a hand. "And if you're cold, why, I believe I can help you with *that*, too..."

It was amazing, really. I couldn't help but shake my head, and it wasn't just because I was feeling euphoric—though I was, oddly so—but because this was the sort of thing that happened to somebody else, not me. I never really thought that I deserved it. I mean, what had I done to inspire this? Except maybe to show up at her door...?

She seemed to read my mind. "Oh Mark," she sighed, "my Mark, that you could just walk into my life...it must have been Fate. Or maybe the Gods are smiling on me." She took my other hand, gently pulled me to my feet. "You are a very beautiful man, Mark. *I* am the fortunate one."

Well, what could I say to that? I couldn't think of anything, so I just smiled as she reached behind her and turned on some music. "Do you dance?" she said softly, turning back to me. "Please tell me you dance, Mark. Even if you don't, tell me you do."

I shrugged. "Well, I've always wanted to learn the polka," I said with a smile, hoping that would satisfy her. I liked dancing well enough, but I can barely keep out of my own way.

Surprise! She gave an excited little jump. "Polka!" she cried. "I *love* to Polka! That's the dance of love, you know." She winked at me. "Why Mark, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to get on my good side. But later, perhaps." Then she looped my arms around her, put her own around my neck, and we danced about the only way I know how, the gentle side-to-side sway of a couple at their first prom.

The music...well, it was a quietly desperate piece, a woman despairing for a lost love, only to accept that her lot was, "just the way it is". It was sad, and faintly reminiscent of her life, and, truth told, my own.

But now, that had all changed, hadn't it? So suddenly, so wonderfully...

...and so *cold*...

"Joanne," I said softly, "really, can we turn up the heat a little, maybe light a fire?"

No, I really said that. This is how clueless I was...still am, I suppose, that it was only in retrospect that it occurred to me how ludicrously double-entendre that must've sounded. But the fact was, I *was* cold, colder than I had been in the cave, colder than I'd been in *any* cave, colder even than I'd been last time I'd ridden a motorcycle during a snowstorm and managed to sink myself dangerously into hypothermia. And this was a deeper chill, a bone-deep cold, which was somewhat ironic in that not too long ago it had been Joanne who'd been chilled. And wasn't *that* odd, that she seemed warm now. And not just in that one way either.

It was no surprise that she took the cue, intended or otherwise. "Oh, I can turn up the heat, Mark," she whispered huskily. "Oh, yes I can."

"No, listen, I'm really, really cold." I wasn't a fool. I knew what she had in mind...or, at least I thought I did. "I feel like I'm taking a chill or something..."

In response, she pulled herself closer to me. "It's all right, Mark. It's all right. I'll make you warm."

And now I was starting to shake. "Joanne, I'd like nothing more than to..." I managed to suppress a shiver, but only with the greatest of effort. "I just don't think I'd be able to...you know, perform...I'm so cold..."

That was when she put her hand—her *warm* hand—inside the robe I was wearing. "*He* doesn't seem to be in agreement, Mark," she murmured. There was no coyness to the tone, no teasing; if anything, there was perhaps a trace of urgency.

Besides, it was true. Chilled or no, Mister Happy was very happy indeed.

She leaned up, kissed my lips, her tongue darting in and out of my mouth. "Mark, it's *right*. Admit it. I know how alone you are. I am too. But tonight...if never again...if only this once..."

"No...not just tonight..." I really didn't want this to be a one-night stand, nor did I want her to think I did. But I was so cold...so cold...and she was so warm...

She drew me across the room, through a doorway, into another room, her room. She switched on the light, led me to the bed, sat me down. "Stay here," she said softly. "I'll bring light."

She left, leaving the light on just long enough for me to get a quickly look around. The windows were heavily shuttered and curtained, the walls covered with nature prints, most of which involved sunshiny skies and trees...how sad, I thought, the only way she gets to see things like that is in the dark...

No mirrors though. Odd, that was odd...it wasn't as if I was a keen observer of women, but I'd never been in a woman's bedroom that didn't have at least one mirror. Even my own room had a mirror. And all those nature prints were all matte-framed. There wasn't a reflection to be seen anywhere.

And soon there wasn't much light either. Joanne returned a moment later with a pair of candles, turning off the overhead and closing the door as she entered. She stood for just a moment, beaming happily down at me, and as I looked at her, I swear, I wondered if maybe my earlier guesstimates as to her age hadn't been completely wonky. Now she looked barely forty, if not younger. Even as she approached I marveled that the crow's feet—laugh-lines, I called them when they appeared on my own face—seemed to have completely disappeared, and the skin on her arms had lost its parchment appearance. Amazing, what a little attention will do, I thought.

She set the candles on either side of the bed, then she returned to me, laid me down, and covered me with a thick comforter. "Listen to me," she murmured, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I want you to know something before we...before I start."

I nodded. I felt a little warmer. Not much, but the shaking had stopped, at least.

"I...I've been watching you. From the first day you came here, I've been watching you. Out the peepholes, as much as I could. I saw you that first day, I heard you singing when you thought nobody could hear. I heard, Mark. And I watched, and when you left I prayed that you'd come back. When you did, I knew that I had to meet you. I couldn't have dreamed it would end up like this."

I smiled. "I'm glad it did."

She kissed me. "As am I, my Mark. Do you feel warmer now?"

"Not a whole lot," I admitted, but I was pretty far past caring by now.

"Don't worry." She slipped off her peignoir. "You will." Another kiss. "You will." Again. "And soon, my Mark. Soon."

She slid under the comforter with me.

So it began.

A long time passed, how long I can't even begin to guess, I was so beyond any concept of time as anything but an abstract construct that didn't really have any meaning. It was...beyond any puny descriptive powers I might possess. Beyond adjectives, beyond superlatives. It transcended the physical and crossed the line into the spiritual. My head spun with it all, a magnificent giddiness that surpassed anything I'd ever known. Above it all, one thought reigned supreme: *I must have this woman, at any and all cost.*

I loved her, completely and utterly. That was really all there was to it.

I tried to tell her. Really, I did. But each time she seemed to anticipate it, covering my mouth with a kiss, taking my breath away with another caress, stealing my will with another impossible maneuver that would leave me trembling. Her touch was intoxicating, a hand held out from heaven, beckoning me onward, and if heaven it was—or hell, it didn't really matter—I was ready to dwell there forever.

Now, I ought to note that my actual participation in all of this was pretty much limited to what she would allow me to do, which frankly, wasn't much. I just didn't want any impression getting across that anything I was doing was somehow eliciting this sort of behavior. It was all Joanne, all the time.

But that was just fine with me. Like I said, I loved her now, and I was prepared for anything.

Anything...except...

Probably I should've seen it coming. *You* have, haven't you? The eyes that followed me everywhere, her almost ghostly pallor, her "photoallergic dermatoses", the weird transference of my body heat to her, the sudden restoration of her youth. The almost mesmeric eyes. And the absence of mirrors. That alone should've been a dead giveaway, no pun intended, and I mean that.

So no, I wasn't exactly ready when she pinned my shoulders to the bed again, looked down at me with an immense sadness on her face and tears welling from her eyes, and said, "Oh Mark, I'm so sorry, so sorry..."

"No, don't be," I panted, breathless, "don't be, Joanne, I understand."

"No Mark, you don't," she sobbed, "you can't."

Her eyes were huge in her face now, and were locked on my own. I couldn't have looked away, even if I'd wanted to...which I certainly did not.

The blue flecks in the irises seemed to be dancing now, doing something of an ocular polka, fascinating to watch. I lay back, smiled, held in thrall for what seemed like hours and waited for whatever would come next.

What came was—then, anyway—a surprise. She rested her warm, warm body on mine, fastened her lips to my neck, began to suck.

A hickey? I thought blearily. Never got a hickey before, always wondered what one felt like...

I heard, rather than felt, the bite. The sound, the odd sensation of sharp canines piercing flesh, tissue, cartilage. The rushing thrum of blood being drawn from an artery.

And it was at this point I finally realized what you've known for quite some time:

Joanne Heaton was a vampire.

I was her intended victim.

This is what I thought of as I lay there, listening to the sound of my life being drained from me. Was I really a victim? I actually argued with myself in a detached sort of way. How could *I* be a victim? I mean, the word implies that I was her *prey*, and that may or may not have been true, but it also might indicate that I was likely *unwilling*.

Unwilling?

Really?

I'd let her lead me here. Oh, I suppose her eyes *had* cast some sort of spell, whatever. Under their influence I'd have likely gone along with anything she suggested.

Or, maybe...maybe I really *did* love her. And it didn't matter what she was.

In the ghastly course of her feeding, she must have lost her odd ability to read my thoughts. Either way, she sure didn't see what was coming next. And what came next was my gasping her name, urging her to take it all.

All? All of *me*? Had I really said that?

Oh, I had, and oh, she'd heard. And it got her attention, that did. "Oh Mark," she cried in despair, sitting bolt upright, her mouth bright red with my blood, "do you *know* what you've just *done*?" She sounded positively frantic.

Well, if I remember my vampire lore—and I do—one thing you're warned is to never, ever invite one in your door, because that invitation gives them the power to walk in and out any time they choose. Or so goes the mythology as I understood it. So, by interpretation and extension, telling a vampire to *take it all* as much as comprises an invitation to not merely have a little tidbit or even a late-night snack, but to drain the victim (that word again, misused, I insisted to myself) entirely.

Her hand rested on my cheek, and her question was repeated. "Do you *know*, Mark? Do you *understand*?"

I had often imagined the circumstances under which I would speak the next words which passed my lips. I suppose I always figured it would be at my wedding, whenever and with whomever that might've taken place...and funny, wasn't it, that I was thinking in past tense?

But the more I considered it—and believe me, I had the time—I thought that this was nothing if not a marriage. Different, yes, but not so vastly different, and the words were spoken with no less passion, and really, no more permanent intent.

So I meant it, then, when I told Joanne: "*I do*." Understand, that is. Yes, I knew exactly what I'd said, and what the implications would be. But I also meant it in that other way...as in, *to have and to hold...till death...*

And now, at the end, she knew exactly what I'd meant. She shook her head, her cascading hair swirling about my face like a silvery brook in flood.

"Oh Mark..." she cried, then she moaned pitifully, her tears dropping gently onto my face, little puddles of warmth on skin that had gone corpse-cold.

"All of it," I whispered. "All of me, Joanne. I...love you."

She uttered a cry of despair, a keening wail of grief that echoed through my head long after her mouth had returned to its feeding, and my consciousness slipped away, my last conscious thoughts being of that smell...mmm, vanilla...

I was alone.

Lost in a forest. A forest of snowy trees. Snowy trees bathed in a brilliant, unearthly luminescence.

Alone...but not alone. There was something...

...and then I was pursued, running, bounding through snow-covered grass, cold, so very cold, darting from the half-shadows of trees, looking behind me, around me, below and above me, looking for...what?

Pursued. Captured. Held.

I fought. Oh, how I fought. Vainly.

Pinned. I was pinned. Like a butterfly in someone's collection, pinned out on the snow, a bright white sun above me...eyes, eyes swimming out of the light, noises I didn't recognize at first eventually coalescing into rational speech, words I could finally grasp, understand, respond to.

It wasn't a forest, then. It was a hospital. I wasn't pinned, I'd been restrained. I'd been fighting them, it seemed. I had swam in and out of consciousness a few times, but only now did I really come back to myself. So I answered the inevitable questions, and then asked one myself: I was Markus Raymond Allyn, called Mark, I lived on Spruce Street in Bloomington, I was a student at IU, a part time consulting PC tech for Albert Webb & Associates, and where exactly was I, anyway? Beyond the hospital part, anyway. They told me I was at Bedford Regional Medical Center, and I had been for the past fifteen days, in and out (mostly in) of a coma. Then they asked me if I knew how I'd gotten there.

And the answer to that was, no. I hadn't a clue. Not the faintest idea. In fact, I didn't remember a whole lot of anything. I knew it had something to do with a cave, but that was about all I could come up with. Eventually it occurred to me to ask them what *they* knew, but that wasn't much help either...apparently some unknown someone had dropped me off at the Emergency Room just before dawn one morning and just that quickly peeled away. A dark-colored Mercedes, or some such European car, they said. I wasn't hurt badly, but I was a couple of quarts low...on *blood*, so low that I was barely alive. It was a near thing, they said. Never have I been so grateful to have been a Red Cross donor.

They ended up running the usual battery of tests on me, and they asked me a lot of uncomfortable questions before finally turning me loose, at least as soon as they were sure that the oddly clean bite marks on my neck weren't infected or rabid, my blood count was more or less back to normal, and I didn't have a screw loose. They weren't really convinced on that last score, but I did manage to escape anyway, following profuse promises to visit the psychologist to which they'd referred me. Something about recovering memories. I wasn't so sure I was interested in that sort of thing.

I called Trey, who picked me up and drove me to the county impound lot, where I retrieved my car. Trey had a lot of questions I couldn't answer either, but at least he was (for a change) good-natured about the whole thing, and he even talked the folks at the lot into turning loose of my car *sans* the usual storage fee. "He's been in the fargin' hospital, dude," he ranted, only he didn't say 'fargin', if you know what I mean and I'm sure you do. I'm still amazed we got out of there with our freedom, never mind our cars. Trey could be like that.

From there...well, I had some unfinished business, I knew. What exactly that business was, I still had no idea, but I at least had some clues: Trey had refreshed my memory of what we'd been doing at 4H and roughly where it was. That part I remembered. The rest? Gone, like a freshly-erased chalkboard.

Except...like the metaphoric blackboard, there were faint traces left behind...faint, but discernable in time. I remembered a house in the woods...somewhere. Eyes, eyes I couldn't see, watching me. A faintly lit darkness, cold, so cold...and a smell, something wonderfully pleasant. No faces, no names, no locations. Not much to go on, but it was a start, and perhaps the shrink wasn't such a bad idea at that. Probably it was a good thing I hadn't mentioned any of this to the nice folks at BRMC though, as they probably would've insisted I stay a while longer, perhaps until I recovered my memory, and who knew how long *that* might be?

It wasn't till I finally went through the bag of personal belongings I'd brought home from the hospital that I found the key that would unlock the first chest of memories: a GPS. Not mine, I didn't have that kind of dough. No, this belonged to IUSC, or at least that's what the label on the back read. It was no great shock to find I couldn't remember how to work it, but an hour or two of experimentation later I managed to pry a couple of waypoints from it that didn't match anything on any of my topographic maps, something even Trey didn't know about. And they were in the general vicinity of 4H.

It wasn't much, but it was all I had, so I got in my car and drove in the direction the little widget pointed me, which turned out to be south of Bloomington to Springville, and then west along winding country roads that

didn't look at all familiar, between stands of big trees and over rolling hills and around sinkholes. Typical southern Indiana cave country, something I should have been vastly familiar and comfortable with, but I was neither, and that was what I found most disquieting.

But what could I do? The little strings of numbers, the flags on the LCD display, they were all I had. So I followed them, and eventually I discovered that one of them was apparently for a parking spot, about a half mile overland from the second marker. I parked the car, got out, and found a faintly flagged trail that was obviously of my own making leading into the woods. I followed it with an even mixture of curiosity and dread to the dry bed of a creek, and then to a cave entrance in it.

Things began to click into place. I sat on the edge of the narrow crevice leading downward, my head in my hands, trying to collect what bits of memory were whipping about my brainpan. It was difficult, with that feeling of eyes...

...eyes. Yes. The invisible, all-seeing eyes, watching me.

Eyes. A cave. A forest. That meant there had to be a house somewhere. I crept around the area, looking for any faint sign of a footpath heading anywhere other than toward the road. It took a while, but finally I found it, and followed it to a clearing, where I found the house, the sight of which activated still more memories, memories that told me it would be pointless to knock on the front door, or *any* door, in fact, until sunset. So I waited, with those eyes watching me, in the chill November afternoon, my legs dangling back in that dark well, and my mind awash with possibilities, most of which were unpleasant. And finally, when the sun had only just dipped below the horizon, I returned to the house and made ready to knock on the back door.

Except that it opened from within before my knuckles ever touched wood. And standing on the other side was an extraordinarily lovely woman, whose silver hair and staggering gray eyes took my breath away...and returned my memories to me, in a flood so abrupt that I staggered off of the stoop and sat down, lest I fall.

When I finally managed to collect myself, I stood again and looked at the woman who would be my greatest love through the screen door. The look on her face was forlorn and afraid...afraid of *me*.

Her name, blessedly, had returned. "Joanne," I said quietly.

She stepped back from the door.

"Don't go," I called. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt *me*?" came her grim but sad response in a soft, breathy tone.

"*You* can't hurt me, Mark. But I can most certainly hurt you, and once the sun goes down completely, you won't have any way to escape me. Go, now!"



The last two words were a blend of a lupine growl faintly underlain with infinite sorrow. "I don't want to escape you," I pleaded. "I want to help you."

She stepped back to the screen, appearing like a wraith faintly visible beyond the pale. "You can't help me either," she murmured. "I am beyond your help. But I...I thank you for your offer, and for...your...nourishment...I..."

And then, she staggered out the door and fell, sobbing, into my arms.

I held her, stroked her silver hair, whispered calming words into her ear. The night had fallen, wrapping us in velvety blackness long before she was composed enough to finally whisper, "I'm so sorry, Mark. So sorry. I couldn't help myself...it had been so long...so long..."

"That's enough of that," I said firmly. "You don't have to apologize for what you are. Do you remember what I told you that night, Joanne? I do," those words again, "and I meant it. You *could* have taken me, and I would've been perfectly content in it. And if you still do, well, that's all right too. But let's talk a while first. Maybe we can think of a way out."

"There is no way out...no way out...no way..." And she repeated that on and on as she clung to me as I walked her into the house and down the stairs into her apartment. Once there, we sat on the sofa, she still clutching me and crying but without tears now, because they'd all been spent. There was a little additional time before she was finally ready to talk, and when she did, it wasn't what I wanted to hear her say.

"Mark, I want you to kill me," is what she said.

"Out of the question," I told her when I'd recovered from the shock.

"No, Mark. It's what you *must* do. If you don't, then I *will* have to...take you." She laid a hand on my cheek. "Which is not to say that it wouldn't be pleasant for you. It would."

Of that I was sure. I felt a pleasant twitch in my loins at her touch.

"But I couldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't because...because I love you, my Mark, and I could never forgive myself if I were to kill the man I loved."

"And who loves you," I reminded her. "You know that, don't you?"

She smiled through eyes that were again becoming moist. "Yes, my Mark, I know. As you must know that it could never happen, and why." She detached herself from me and walked across the room to a lampstand, pulled open a drawer on it, and extracted a very old-looking pistol. Bringing it back, she offered it to me. "Here," she said bravely. "This is all you need."

I looked at her askance. "That's not what I've read."

"Don't believe everything you read. Shoot me and I'll die, just like any other human being. But you must be exact...it has to be in the head, and it has to destroy the brain."

"What, like in a zombie flick?"

"Precisely. All of that business about stakes in the heart is nonsense. The heart is only a pump. The brain is the seat of function. Destroy that, and we're done. We...heal very quickly otherwise."

I took the weapon from her. It was old, how old I couldn't even begin to guess. "I don't know, Joanne," I told her. "This thing is pretty old. When was the last time you fired it?"

"Fired it? Never." She hung her head. "I tried, Mark, I did, I swear. But there is something...some awful instinct of self-preservation, something that even trumps morality and guilt." She sat back down beside me and shook her head. "I couldn't, Mark. Whatever it is made me what I am, it won't let me."

"And I'm glad of it." I kissed her and stroked her face. "So forget it, I won't do it. There's got to be another way out of this." I looked at the pistol. "Where did you get this thing? It looks like it'd be worth more as an antique than as self-defense." Or self-destruction, but I didn't say that.

"From Anton. Or Toni, or whatever he's calling himself these days. He gave it to me for protection." She laughed bitterly. "As though I somehow needed it. What I needed was protection from *him*. But of course, I was too blind, or perhaps too smitten." And she told me how as a thirty-three year old widow she'd met a young Polish immigrant named Anton "Toni" Wlodya at a town dance, of the (dubious) plans for the future they'd made together...and how later that night he'd initiated her into the ranks of the undead. "The worst part of it," she concluded, "was that in the end, when I was in his arms, looking up at him and seeing those fangs, I knew what was about to happen, though I didn't have any real concept of what a vampire was...I still knew...and I welcomed it."

"Well, I understand that part, at least," I said consolingly. "But you know you never really had a choice."

"Maybe. Maybe you're right. Or...maybe not, Mark. Did *you*? When you told me to take all of you, did you know what you were saying?"

It was a fair question, but I knew the answer. "Yes. Yes, I did."

"But...why?"

I looked down at her hands, still so pale, but now soft, smooth, and warm. "Because I love you."

Her eyes filled with tears again. "Oh Mark, you don't know...you don't know me, what I've done..."

"I love you," I repeated, "and the past doesn't matter. What happened, whatever you are or might be, that doesn't change anything, not as far as I'm concerned." I looked back to her lovely, grieving face. "Because that's what someone who loves you does, they accept you as you are."

"And that doesn't make this..." her breath gave a little hitch, "doesn't make it...any easier to take." And she began to cry again.

With little else to do, I just held her and let her wring herself out, and when finally she did, I held her hands and said, "Look, what if I were to kill *him*? Anton? If I killed him, broke the line of succession, if you will...wouldn't that free you? It does in all the stories I've ever read."

She gave me a tolerating smile. "Those same stories tell you I'd turn to dust in direct sunlight, don't they?"

"You mean you wouldn't?"

Finally, a laugh, but it wasn't without some bitterness. "Oh no, nothing so melodramatic. I'd burn, yes. And I suppose eventually I'd turn to dust. But it would take a long time, and I can't tell you how much it hurts. Believe me, I *have* tried to go out, Mark." She sighed. "I so miss being able to run through the woods. I love them. They were my only consolation when my first love died in the Great War. I know the crevice you went into, and there was many a time I stared into it myself, wondering what was at the bottom."

"We'll explore it together then, you and I." I smiled at her. "That's the beauty of caving, you know. It could be the official sport of vampires."

She kissed me fondly, her lips salty from her tears. "And would we be caught in a storm and flushed from the cave as you were? Clouds don't even slow down the rays that would slowly, horribly kill me. It only takes once to learn the lesson, and it was taught to me a long, long time ago."

"We *will* explore it together," I repeated, "once you're set free." I hefted the pistol. "I'll take this thing, make it work, and take care of Anton, and then..."

"But Mark, if you do that, then won't I age? I'm quite old, you know." She made a face. "I look like I do now because I fed. That restores me, to a point. Not as much as if I had...well, you know."

"Taken all of me."

She nodded. "I'd have stayed as I was rather than kill you."

"And I'd take you at age..." I tried to do the math, eventually deciding it would be inappropriate, in the extreme. "Whatever that age is. I don't care. If it comes down to my taking care of you for the rest of your life, I'll do that."

She sighed and leaned into me, her face easing comfortably (for her, not so for me) where the stitches closed the wounds from her bite. Amazing, they didn't seem to hurt at all, not even when they were stitched at the hospital. Probably she had seen to that. "Oh Mark, why weren't you born about seventy years sooner? Then none of this would've happened, and we would have been growing old together, perfectly happy."

"If I have my way, we still can be. Now, tell me how to find him."

It embarrasses me to admit that I almost had to borrow money from her, but it's true. I was as much as broke, and I didn't have enough gas in the

Chevy to get where I needed to be, which was Indianapolis. “The city,” she told me, and I asked if she meant Bedford, the nearest town, and she rolled her eyes and repeated “The *city*,” and I tried Bloomington, and she sighed and said it again, only this time with a capital letter. So Indy it was.

But, she gave me no gas money. Instead, she gave me her car, a flawless black Mercedes, vintage 1985. “If someone sees you,” she told me, obviously thinking a lot more clearly than I, “we can’t have them identifying your car, can we?” That made perfect sense, of course. So I had spent an hour taking the pistol (a very old Colt) apart and cleaning it carefully, then I took it outside and tried it. It failed on one round, but the second went off with a terrific report. Fifty-fifty was good enough odds when facing a vampire, I figured, and maybe if more than one failed, I could just keep squeezing off shots till one went true. Or so I hoped as I drove north on 37 toward my goal.

I love this road, which I’ve always thought of as the Caver’s Highway. When I first came south from my home in northwest Indiana, it was 37 that carried me south through Martinsville, Bloomington, Bedford, Mitchell, and Orleans and back and forth, again and again. I knew of a couple of dozen good caves within a stone’s throw of the macadam, several of which passed beneath the road, and one stupendous example that actually had an entrance on the highway right-of-way. I had lots of friends here, lots of good memories associated with this strip of asphalt. I hoped that the karma I’d built up through the years might see me through this ordeal.

“He shouldn’t be hard to find,” Joanne had assured me. “He claims to be out every night, usually drinking and dancing. He doesn’t feed every night—he has some sense of discretion, apparently—but he stays close to a food source.” She gave me a couple of matchbooks. “He left these here. He still smokes, and never uses lighters. He says matches look sexier.” She rolled her eyes. “The worst thing is, he’s probably right. He spends enough time among those sorts of folk, he ought to know.”

*Those sorts of folk.* There was a tone to her voice, not scornful, more piteous. I was almost one of them, too...after the divorce, I’d done my share of bar-hopping before deciding that the kind of woman I was apt to meet there wouldn’t be the sort I’d care to spend any free time with. Call me closed-minded, but I would rather be alone than be saddled with someone who wasn’t the best match for me. Once bitten, and all that.

She had given me two matchbooks, both bearing the names of nightclubs, but only one of them was open past 2 AM: Cloudia’s. “Dinner, Drinks, Dancing, Debauchery” the cover read. Sounded right up Anton’s alley, I figured, so I discarded the other book and made Cloudia’s my target. I found it packed, and being as I was packing, and they had a metal detector at the door, I’d have to walk in unarmed. I decided then that it would be best to

scope the place out, make sure Anton was actually there, and then leave and wait for him outside. Busy as the place was, it wouldn't do to cause a stir. Later, then. But locate him first.

And Joanne had been right: he was not hard to find at all. The center of attention, she said. "He still has the magnetism to him," she told me, with a sigh tinged with regret and some longing. "I'm not sure but it was the smell of him that attracted me."

"Well, it was *your* smell that got my attention first," I responded, sniffing her. "If it's something peculiar to vampires, I hope you can bottle it. I like it."

At least she still had a sense of humor. "Perhaps I should go take a long hot bath and save the water?"

"Oh, do that!"

"I think you're smelling my homemade laundry detergent. Anyway, he'll probably have two or three women around him. Or men, he doesn't seem to mind either way."

And he didn't, either. His table was loaded. Women on either side of him, men across from him. I couldn't tell which one—or *ones*, he might have more than one—were his companions this particular night and which were the hangers-on. They all looked alike to me...young, pretty, rosy-cheeked, full of vitality and life. And, obviously, blood.

How easy was he to spot? Well, if you're looking for a vampire, it helps to know what one looks like, and by this time I did, of course. Oh, he had his hair colored, but the eyes...those lupine orbs were unmistakable. And yes, he was attractive...I might go so far as to say *beautiful*, with that same stunning glamour that Joanne possessed.

At the moment, anyway. Maybe it was something inherent to the breed, and maybe it would be gone the moment she was freed. But that didn't matter. I was committed now. This was it, my Rubicon had been crossed. By the time the sun rose, one or more...perhaps all three of us, would be dead.

It was almost four when he finally emerged from Claudia's, a woman on each arm whom he summarily dismissed as he stepped regally down the walk toward the parking lot. They would never know how close they had come to the proverbial fate worse than death.

He was whistling as he walked—whistling! And whistling, "I Ain't Got Nobody", of all things! It would've been almost comic, if I hadn't been so grimly serious.

I rolled down the window as he strolled by, unconcerned. "Toni?" I called softly.

He stopped, looked over at me. "Anton," he said in a lyrical voice. "No one's called me Toni in years. Do I know you?"

"Oh, maybe," I said, trying to sound something other than the nervous wreck I was at that moment. "Maybe you do. Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

He walked over, leaned down to the window. "That would depend where we're going," he replied with a coy smile. "You're a little...older, than the usual man who approaches me. But you're attractive, in an earthy kind of way."

I smiled, trying for cool but probably achieving nothing closer than awkward. "Climb in," I said. "You can leave your car here. We can...go somewhere quiet."

"I'd much rather drive my own, thanks," he declined. "Besides, I've seen this car before, and if I'm right, that means rather bad news for one of us."

"You're right," I said, showing him the Colt. "Very bad news."

"Oh my god!" he laughed. "What do you know! Joanne finally found herself a lackey to come try and take me out! Well, slave boy, you'll be hard pressed to do it with that old cannon. It probably hasn't been fired since the Roosevelt administration. *Teddy* Roosevelt, that is."

"And you'd be wrong." I opened the door, motioned with the barrel. "Get in. Unless you'd care to find out just how effective this thing is right now."

"You wouldn't dare. Not here, not in public."

I smiled grimly. "No one knows me here. The car is as non-descript as you can get. You ought to know, you bought it for her. The plates came off a Gremlin I found abandoned along 37 north of Martinsville. There's nothing to tie what happens here to her, or to me. So what it comes down to is, here, or somewhere quiet? It's up to you. Doesn't matter to me either way."

That had been Joanne's idea. "Give him an out," she said. "He will fight you, but he won't run. If he thinks he has a chance of overwhelming you, he'll take it. He loves a challenge."

Challenge or no, he didn't have much choice. "All right lackey," he sighed, climbing behind the wheel and closing the door. "Where shall I take us? What do you wish to see as your last vision of earth?"

"Well, if it's to be that, I'd like to see the Speedway. I've never been."

"Fair enough."

"And put on your seatbelt."

He laughed. "But of course."

There was a purpose in driving to Speedway, which is as much a suburb of Indianapolis as it is the home of the World's Greatest Race Course. The sad fact is that the town is not what it used to be, being somewhat decrepit, with lots of shuttered businesses and abandoned factories. Plenty of opportunity for crime, then, although how much actually took place I have no

idea. There is an effort underway to improve things, so I'm told, but for my purposes, for this morning, it was ideally suited.

He drove us right past the tunnels that swept under the western end of the race track. "Here we are," he said gaily. "Where shall we go then? Dawn is coming, you know, and I'm a bitch when I'm burning from the inside out. Trust me, if you don't like me now, you'll like me even less then."

"I don't have anything against you," I told him quietly. "You are what you are, and you can't help that. Why you keep doing it, knowing what you do, that part I don't understand." I pointed behind what looked like an abandoned strip mall on 16<sup>th</sup> Street. "There. Pull in behind that building."

"You think I'm so evil, lackey," he said, "but you ignore the simple truth that Joanne does the same as I do. And probably she *did* the same to you." He nodded at the marks on my neck. "Did it occur to you that you're acting under her influence?"

"That did cross my mind," I admitted. Those gray eyes with their dancing flecks of blue...yes, it was very possible, likely even, that they could've easily persuaded me to this sort of act. And yet..."I don't think it's so, though. Besides, from the looks of you, you're feeding pretty regularly. How often do you think *she* eats, Anton?"

"Is that so important? Even an attack a few times every few years is still quite a tally over nearly a century. Have you considered that, lackey?"

That was a valid point, and one I'd considered. But she had also explained that a little went a long way, that she had survived on animal blood as well, and that along with supporting her financially he had often brought her the spoils of his own kills. Or near-kills. "He shares," she'd told me, "and I give him that. But what you must keep in mind is that if they live, then there's a fair chance they become like us. He knows this too, and he doesn't want too many of our kind competing with him, so usually he kills what he eats...but slowly. Slowly. He can make a body last."

Which meant that there were probably lots of missing persons cases in the greater Indianapolis area that were very cold, indeed. And that made him a monster in the most genuine sense of the word. Joanne was reluctant in what she did, even abhorrent; Anton was wonton.

"Shut it off," I said to him, "and get out." He did, and I slid out as well.

"So this is to be it, is it, lackey?" He sighed. "A shame. To corrupt a body like this..." He smiled lasciviously. "You know, we're not far from my place." He tried to lock his eyes with mine. "We could have a good time together, you and I. Even at...her *age*...Joanne is a lovely lady, to be sure, but I...I could show you things...*teach* you things...and then, afterward...we could join together, and I could introduce you to the crowd at Cloudia's. It is

simply an *amazing*, place, lackey, and there are women—and me—there who would make you forget Joanne, and right quickly at that..."

Quickly. As soon as the word came out of his mouth he darted toward me, going for the pistol. Quickly, oh yes, he did move quickly. But not as quickly as I did, stepping aside and squeezing the trigger.

Click.

Nothing.

"Told you so, lackey," Anton laughed, walking toward me slowly now, seemingly convinced that I was helpless. "The bullets in that piece are at least sixty years old, and..."

...and still quite effective, half the time at least. I squeezed the trigger again, this time unleashing a round that went through his chest, knocking him backward.

"Son of a *bitch*," he gasped in astonishment...and, apparently, rage. "That was a six hundred dollar silk shirt! I'll see you suffer for that, lackey."

I think he was counting on me being shocked that he was still alive. I won't say that I wasn't a little unnerved, but I was well aware that a shot in the heart wouldn't kill him. "Don't bother getting up again," I told him as calmly as I could. "There is as good a place as any to end it."

And now he was bewildered. Maybe it was the fact the lackey had the upper hand and didn't appear to be frightened. Maybe it was that someone had stood up to him. Or maybe he'd had a glimpse of his mortality. I'm not sure which was truer. In any case, I leveled the weapon at him again, taking careful aim at his head.

"My god," he said quietly.

"You'll see him soon enough," I said. "Or her. I hope they're not as judgmental as you."

It had to be quick. I could see the stain of blood on his shirt shrinking. Soon he'd be capable of standing again, standing and fighting.

"She'll die, you know," he said, his voice trembling. "If I die, so will she. You know that, don't you, lackey?"

"Better dead than undead," I replied, pulling back the hammer. "Better a lackey than lonely."

And finally, he seemed to understand. He closed his eyes. "Then...ask her, if you would...to forgive me."

I already had, and I told him so: "She forgave you a long time ago, Anton."

He heard that, and he smiled. "Then I could ask for nothing more."

My next shot was true, and just that quickly he was dead. More than dead enough. I stayed only long enough to make certain, then I left. No one saw me go.



The next couple of hours, I don't honestly recall. I know that I drove from Speedway to Springville, and that I did it fairly quickly. Dawn had already broken over Lawrence County by the time I pulled the Mercedes up the disused pair of ruts that led to her house, and rolled to a stop at the back door.

I sat in the car for a moment staring at the house, dreading what I might find inside. Then I decided it wouldn't get any better waiting, so I hesitantly climbed out of the car and tried the door. It was locked, so I looked for the key beneath the rock...only to remember that I'd used it the previous evening, and hadn't replaced it. I swore colorfully, figuring I really *would* have to break in now, before deciding to check the front door first. Perhaps it would prove easier to force.

I did not find easier entry, but I did find something else...a note, tacked to the door.

It read:

*My Mark,*

*I have gone out to test if my new-found freedom is a reality.*

*If I am not back when you return, look for me in the woods. You know where.*

*If you don't find me alive, know that I died with your name on my lips, spoken with*

*love,*

*your Joanne*

The time was also noted, as 7:30. It was now a quarter of nine.

I walked into the woods, heading in the direction of the dry stream bed and the cave entrance. It wasn't very far, but I couldn't seem to move fast enough, eventually breaking into a sprint for the last few yards to the opening in the woods and, inevitably, tripping over a fallen log and tumbling headlong into the rocky dry-bed. When I came to my senses, I sat up, looked around, found myself alone.

"Joanne?" I called, first softly, then with increasing volume and urgency. "Joanne! *Joanne!*"

There was no answer.

I sat there, I don't know how long, listening to the wind sighing in the trees above me, and the faint sounds of water flowing in the cave below, until finally I added my own sorrow to the already melancholy atmosphere, crying

bitterly for my loss. Yes, she was better off now, surely she was...or did I really know that? What sort of torture had she endured? Anton had spoken of burning from the inside out...was that what had happened? Had she died a slow, agonizing death, burned from within, her body finally turning to ash, now gone like so much dust?

My anguish knew no bounds. I know that sounds melodramatic, but it's truer than true. I had abruptly, and horribly, lost the woman who, for so short a time, had seemed to be the one I'd looked for all my life.

I cried for a long, long time...I cannot even begin to guess how long.

Then I caught my second wind, and I cried again, only louder, more painfully.

And finally I ran out of energy and just sat.

What would I do? I couldn't go back to that house in Bloomington. Trey was a good friend, sure, but he would be a poor substitute. And he'd have questions, too many questions I couldn't answer. Then there would be the visit I would have to make to the psychologist from BRMC. What would I tell them? What *could* I tell them?

Maybe...maybe it would be better for all concerned if I just disappeared. Went somewhere, anywhere else, somewhere I wouldn't be reminded of *here* everywhere I looked.

But was there such a place? I laughed, but a bitter, bitter laugh. Even the smell of vanilla would no longer be just a scent. Clouds...snow, not long in the future it would snow...anything white, and I would see her...

I took a deep breath. I had to collect myself. She wouldn't want me to be acting so damned silly over her, certainly...maybe I would just go back to the house, find a way in and locate something to take to remember her by, perhaps there was a picture, something with her handwriting, maybe something with her scent on it...

...and that got me started crying again.

I was still crying when I heard the noise from below me. A scuffling sound, a splash from the cave stream. A sigh of relief. And then, a soft cry of surprise.

"Mark?"

I looked down, and there she was, her face illuminated from above by the sun...yes, the *sun*, the glorious sun, streaming down through the crevice and kissing her ivory skin, now marred somewhat by a streak of reddish-brown mud.

Mud and all, I decided that I had never seen anything so lovely in my life.

"Mark? Are you crying?"

I took my hand, wiped my face, leaving streaks similar to hers. But I couldn't find words to express my joy. All I could manage was a gasping, "Are you...are you all right?"

"Right as rain." She squinted in the light. "But...Mark?" She held up her hands.

I climbed down, stood next to her.

"Anything," I said imploringly. "Anything. Just ask."

She gave me a wonderfully innocent look. "I just want to know...where is this wonderful cave you were telling me about? I can't seem to find it."

I hadn't expected that. "Which way did you go?"

She motioned upstream. "That way."

"Ah. The big cave is *downstream*."

She mused on that a moment, then nodded. "Oh. Downstream. That way."

"And you shouldn't even be down here alone," I scolded gently, pointing to her single flashlight. "But I guess you can do whatever you like. It's your cave."

"No, Mark," she murmured, barely audible over the soft sounds of the cave. "*Our* cave."

The significance of what she'd said didn't hit me at first. "*Our* cave?"

"Well, of course. We will be living here together now, won't we? I'm sure you don't expect me to share that house in Bloomington with seven icky other men." She shuddered. "Especially that Trey Neary character you told me about."

I was crying again, but now they were happy tears.

"I love you, My Mark," she said, stroking my face tenderly. And perhaps there was still some remnant of her vampirism within her, for she said, reading my thoughts, "Nothing but happy tears from now on?"

"For either of us," I agreed.

And it was so.

The next several months were, as I have heard, a whirlwind, but in the most wonderful way. There was so much to do, so much to do. The house had to be cleaned, of course, and that was a superhuman task if ever there had been one. Would that we could've turned an army of cleaners loose, but there was more at stake than just a dirty house.

Like, what was hidden in the walls: cash, as in cold, hard cash, and lots of it, some of it worth a whole lot more than its face value because of its age. "It wasn't as if I ever needed money," Joanne explained as she pulled bundle after bundle from a dozen different hiding places. "But he kept bringing it, and

well, I decided that maybe one day...perhaps it might come in handy." She smiled up at me happily. "And so it has."

And so it has, beyond my wildest dreams. I went to school full time till I finished my degree and now I'm working on a Doctorate in Hydrology, which I think I will complete about the same time as we finish surveying what we now call the Heaton Cave System, which has turned out to be quite large, fifteen miles long as of last week. Trey Neary has led the survey since I stepped away to help raise our children, and he still can't believe that he was scooped so thoroughly by me. But he has a lady friend of his own, a caver, naturally, and probably we'll be going to another wedding in a year or two.

Which brings up two other points. First, our wedding which was simple and short, vows spoken softly and sincerely at the church just up the road from our home with a few cavers and...Zeb Heaton in attendance. Yes, he and Joanne were reunited, as well a sister and brother ought to be, and while he doesn't understand how it is that she is so marvelously well-preserved—it's not exactly something we can explain—he is nonetheless overjoyed to have her back in his life, and they are doing a lot of catching up. We spent our honeymoon at Lake Monroe, and probably we will venture farther afield in time, but for now we both feel more comfortable close to home. To be able to go swimming during the day was, for Joanne, perfectly rapturous. She got a mad sunburn despite the high SPF sunscreen that I applied liberally, but that's all it was, sunburn, and not anything more serious or lasting. She is not so pale now. That's not the only physical change, only the most obvious one; her hair is still mostly silver, though strands of a pretty buttery yellow are working their way into and among it. I will miss the silver, but I will happily embrace the gold when, or if, it arrives. I will adore her either way.

Then, our home life and our children. Joanne made it clear from the beginning that she wanted to be first a wife, and then a mother, with as many children as possible. Naturally, it wasn't to be all *that* simple...and without going into it in too much detail, we tried to conceive for several years without much success. Oh, the *trying* was certainly enjoyable, but discouraging nonetheless. Not sure that there wasn't something genetic involved, we went ahead and put ourselves on the county adoption roll, and when the opportunity to adopt a pair of twins came, we didn't have to think twice. Of course no soon did the papers come through that Joanne learned she was pregnant...good times on top of good times!

And good times ever since. Jackson (for Joanne's father) and Judith (for my mother) are now seven, and Sunny—officially Abigail Heaton Allyn—is three. She earned the nickname as much for her cheerful disposition as her mane of bright blonde hair. All three are bright, happy, and...normal. They know nothing of their parents' past, and it's as likely they will never know.

To the present, then, and a cheery Halloween in the basement...by choice now rather than morbid necessity. We have just come in from trick-or-treating, and I must note that it is wonderful to live in a town that eschews the suburban norm and has its trick-or-treating done not only on Halloween proper, but *after dark*, which, needless to say, is *tres cool*, as Trey would remark. Where I grew up they stopped doing it years ago after some church group complained the holiday glorified Satanism or some such nonsense. But that's America in the post-Bush era, I guess. We shall yet recover.

So. The twins are sorting their candy on the floor...it is pleasantly familiar, this act; my siblings and I did the same after each mission, hopefully swapping what we didn't like for something more palatable. Boston Baked Beans? I'm still trying to figure out how something so hideously named could be considered candy. Never mind; my brother liked them and I usually got an extra popcorn ball for a couple of boxes of the artificially sweetened faux beans. Maybe a wax-papered pack of homemade cookies. Nowadays it's all M&Ms and Reeses and fun-size Kit-Kats and the like. No apples, not a lot in the way of homemade sweets. Though there *is* one house in Springville that still gives out popcorn balls. Ours, of course.

The recipe is my Grandmother's, via her own mother and probably the prior generation as well. Remote as we are, the aroma draws the kids like flies when they're cooking, and of course on the big night we're awfully popular. There are no more soaped windows, needless to say. Joanne still doesn't go out much, but she does enjoy handing out the treats at the door, and she's locally well-known now. Well liked too, which is a big improvement from not so long ago.

And now...we all sit around the television set, on which is playing the original Universal version of *Dracula*. Yes, we still love it, in spite of our past...or perhaps because of it.

Joanne—*my* Joanne—catches my eye. She is staring with those dark, dark eyes of hers...yes, *dark* now, no longer gray. That was apparently an artifact of her days of walking among the undead. They are a brown so deep and thick as to be chocolate, dark chocolate...but still mixed with those tiny pale-blue flecks of what must be mint. They are amazing. I look, stare, see the mint bits swirl, just so...she catches me looking, lazily flutters her eyelids seductively...and I can't tell for sure if perhaps another remnant of those days remains, because surely, she holds me in thrall. And I like it. And later, when the children are in bed, perhaps we will work on creating another little monster or two.

For now, Sunny is sprawled across us, basking in the attention, and then she chirps: "Da, s'dere reely bampize?"

I am speechless. What do I say, knowing what I do? What do we say?

Joanne knows, though. "Yes, my Mark. Do tell her." She smiles at me. I look at those eyes, so trusting, so loving. And I understand.

"No, dear," I say to my daughter. "There's no such thing."

Sunny curls up, smiles, closes her eyes. She is satisfied. Jackson and Judith are busy with their candy, and they are just as content. And Joanne looks adoringly into my eyes, sighs, and lays her head on my shoulder. She, too is content, as am I. Because as far as we're concerned, there really *is* no such thing...anymore.

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