The Last Days of Dracula
A Very Vlad-Mess X-mas

Written by
Burr Martin

As told by
Vlad Dracul

Dedicated to:
All of my family, friends, and anyone alone out there for the holidays. I'm there with you in spirit. You are not alone.
And to the myth of Dracula for helping me find my inner self.

*It is not a requirement to have read
"The Last Days of Dracula" before reading this book.

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And do not forget to purchase my daughter's thicker and much better books THE BOOK OF GEMMA series by Cassie Martin.

CHAPTER ONE
’Twas the Night Before Xmas

Vlad Dracul hated Christmas and it wasn't even here yet.

It was Christmas Eve in Spokane, Washington. The snow had been falling for two days and there was just enough of it piled along the streets.

He sat in his car for another minute, looking through the windshield at the decorations covering nearly every building around him.

Vlad "Dracula" Dracul hated Christmas. Not the reason and not the time of year.

It was the people.

It was too loud, too commercial, and far too bright. Every store seemed determined to outdo the one next to it with lights, inflatable Santas and enough red and green decorations to make the entire city look like it had been attacked by crack addicted Christmas elves.

Even from inside the car he could hear Christmas music playing somewhere nearby.

He sighed. There were only so many times a person could hear the same songs before they stopped being songs and became more of a form of torture.

He looked at the building across the street and said to himself, "Let's get this over with."

He opened the car door and immediately stepped in a puddle.

"Because of course," he said in a low tone.

The parking lot was crowded, although most of the people seemed to be walking toward the larger stores farther down the street. Families carried shopping bags while couples hurried along with their heads down, trying to avoid the cold.

Everyone appeared to be in a hurry and that was another thing Vlad never understood.

These blood bags spent the entire year saying they wanted more time with their families and then waited until the last possible moment to buy something for them.
He watched a man run across the parking lot carrying three large boxes, slip on some ice. The man fell backwards, spinning, his bags scattered to the ground.

Vlad laughed and kept walking. He pulled his coat tighter around himself, trying not to attract too much attention. He didn't want to answer the one question he was asked time and again.

'Why the sunglasses?'

His red, round sunglasses were a bit odd, especially at night, but the reason wasn't to stop the light, although it was a relief from the countless neon Santas he passed.

No. It was because an unfortunate side effect of vampirism was his glowing ember pupils that attracted unwanted attention when he wasn't wearing them.

He was carrying a bright red Christmas bag in one hand. Inside was a new pot for Gerald.

Gerald was a cactus.

Kevin, Vlad's assistant, had bought the plant for the house they shared. Vlad had never really understood why anyone needed a cactus, but over time he had developed a certain amount of respect for Gerald.

The plant required almost nothing from him. It needed very little water, didn't complain and was covered in sharp points that made people think twice before touching it.

Vlad considered that an admirable set of qualities.

He looked down at the bag, "Don't get used to this," he said, "I just didn't want anyone breaking into my car to steal you. This neighborhood seems dicey."

Gerald, as usual, said nothing but seemed thankful.

Vlad appreciated that about him.

Kevin was a different story.

Kevin was a good assistant, although Vlad would never admit that to his face. There were certain things Vlad did for Kevin that he considered expressions of affection, even if he would have called them something else if anyone asked.

He didn't remind Kevin about the things he forgot.

He didn't get angry when Kevin made coffee and somehow managed to leave the empty pot sitting there to burn.

He didn't complain when Kevin wanted time off to go to a comic book convention.

Yes, Vlad treated Kevin like a king. He simply preferred not to let Kevin know.

The real reason Vlad had come to this part of Spokane was because he knew what Kevin wanted for Christmas. He had been talking about it for months.

There was a green ring worn by some superhero that was apparently very important to him, and the only place Kevin believed he could find one was a store called Uncle Wang's Emporium.

Vlad had spent several weeks pretending not to care. He didn't have to ask what the ring did. He asked Kevin a very

simple question one morning;

"What are you doing for Christmas."

What followed was an in depth, seven minute long rant about the ring, in full detail.

Vlad regretted his follow up question about why a superhero needed a ring.

Kevin spent eleven minutes explaining that too.

Vlad had nodded as though he understood. He did not, but realized this was of some importance to Kevin's life. He had finally decided it was better to simply buy the thing than listen to another hour-long explanation about the bobble.

Vlad stopped at the edge of the sidewalk and looked at the building. Puddles had started to form, making Vlad's walk even more irritating.

His cloth Skechers were wet, his pants were damp around the ankles, and the cold had already worked its way through his coat.

The farther he had traveled from the busiest part of town, the fewer people he saw, and even the Christmas music had become faint. The crowds had started thinning as the property values went lower.

That was one good thing about this part of Spokane. Nobody seemed particularly interested in decorating the buildings since the crowds were so small.

Vlad looked at the building in front of him. The store was much bigger than he had hoped. Four stories tall, it was squeezed between a regional bank and an abandoned Sears building that looked like it had been empty for years. A large sign stretched across the front.

UNCLE WANG'S EMPORIUM.

Vlad stared at it, "Of course it’s a huge place."

He had been hoping for a small store. Something with one floor, three aisles and a bored employee sitting behind a counter.

Instead, he had found a building that looked large enough to lose a person in for days.

He took off his sunglasses for a moment and rubbed his eyes. The bright amber glow of his pupils became visible for a moment. He didn't mind it when he needed to scare someone, but he had learned that most people didn't respond well to seeing glowing eyes while shopping.

He put the sunglasses back on, "Christmas," he muttered and walked inside.

The first thing Vlad noticed was the music.

The second thing was the lights.

The third thing was that Uncle Wang apparently believed there was no such thing as too much merchandise or worst of all, neatness.

The place was enormous. Multiple shelves stretched from one end to the other, packed with everything from superhero merchandise to car parts. There were toys, tools, clothing, electronics, decorations, and things Vlad couldn't identify without asking someone.

And this was only the first level.

Vlad looked around ad mumbled to himself, "Wonderful."

He adjusted the red Christmas bag in his hand and started down one of the narrow aisles trying to find any type of cohesion.

He had to move carefully because merchandise had been stacked everywhere. A plastic reindeer leaned against a shelf

beside a box of wrenches, while a display of superhero masks sat next to several shelves of kitchen appliances.

Vlad wondered how anyone found anything in this place.

He walked farther into the store and noticed how the Christmas music became louder, blaring off a single, used, and dirty speaker nailed to a corner shelf.

He stopped beside a display of inflatable snowmen. One of them was taller than he was.

Vlad stared at it as the snowman stared back.

"There is no reason for this."

He continued walking until eventually deciding he would need help.

Vlad approached the counter where a young man stood behind the cash register.

"Excuse me," Vlad said.

The young man looked up.

"I'm looking for a certain green ring that a superhero wears. Size twelve, if you have it."

The employee hesitated.

"Umm... we're out of those."

Vlad stared at him harshly. He had walked through the snow, endured Christmas music and entered a store that appeared to contain enough merchandise to supply a small country, and this man was telling him they were out of the one thing he wanted.

"No."

The employee blinked, "No?"

"No. I did not come this far to be told you are out of something without checking. Now, is there someone here who isn't fulfilling some type of court ordered service that could help me?"

The man gulped, "I think we're out."

"Then look again."

The young man glanced toward another employee standing near the back of the counter.

This man looked older.

He was wearing a coat, a stocking hat, and he had been watching Vlad since he entered.

The younger employee swallowed, "Maybe you should come back tomorrow."

Vlad looked around.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"You are open on Christmas?"

"Um... I think so."

Vlad slowly looked around the store again.

He noticed the lack of customers. The Christmas music was still playing, but the employees weren't acting like people working the busiest shopping night of the year.

Something about the place felt wrong.

The older man finally walked over, "Is there a problem?"

Vlad turned toward him, repeating, "I am looking for a certain item, and I have asked your man here to look again."

"We're closed."

Vlad looked around.

"You are currently open."

"Our computers are down."

"I see."

Vlad took another glance around. He saw employees who looked nervous. He saw empty aisles. He saw a man who seemed much more interested in watching him than selling him a Christmas present.

And he saw a green Christmas display flickering near the back of the store.

Vlad sighed.

He had come to Spokane for one simple reason.

To buy Kevin a stupid green ring.

And to buy Gerald a better pot.

If he acquired this ring, he could go home.

That was all.

He looked at the two employees again and then looked toward the back of the store.

Something was definitely wrong.

He just wished, for once, that Christmas could give him one quiet night.

It seemed unlikely.

CHAPTER TWO
Hark the Gerald Angel Sings

Vlad left Uncle Wang's Emporium with the uncomfortable feeling that the employees had been hiding something from him. He had seen enough suspicious behavior in his lifetime to recognize it, although he usually found that people were hiding something because they were afraid of him rather than because they were planning a robbery.

The older man behind the counter had been particularly nervous, and the others had seemed more interested in watching the front entrance than helping the few remaining customers.

He could have gone back inside and demanded an explanation, but he had already wasted enough time trying to buy a ring for Kevin. He had tried and that should be good enough. He was hearing the ballad of how someone's grandmother was killed by loose reindeer and it was giving him a headache.

Perhaps he could just offer Kevin some cash. He amused himself with the thought that, 'cash was green'.

And whatever was happening inside was not his circus. It was quite possible he could make things worse by going back in. Violence followed him and maybe if these men just took what they could from the registers, they would leave and everyone would be fine.

Besides, his feet were now soaked and he longed for a fire and his favorite bottle of Vodka.

He walked around the side of the building toward the alley, where he could get back to his car without fighting his way through the Christmas crowds.

That was when he noticed the man dressed as Santa Claus.

The man was standing near the back of the building, partly hidden in the shadows, smoking a cigarette. His suit seemed dirty, his beard was crooked, and he looked like a mall Santa the day after. He was holding the door open with his foot.

The man raised his hand to take a drag, and that's when Vlad noticed the pistol tucked beneath his coat.

He sighed, looked down at the ground, doing a quick assessment of the night.

He stopped walking and looked at the man's face.

"Why do you have a gun?"

The man looked up from his cigarette. "What?"

"The gun. Why does Santa need a gun?"

"Mind your own business."

"I am trying to understand something. You are dressed as a jolly old man who delivers presents to children, yet you are carrying a firearm. Is this a new tradition? Have the reindeer started carrying weapons too?"

The man took another drag from his cigarette and gave Vlad a long, irritated look. "Keep walking."

Vlad glanced at the pistol again.

"I suppose you could threaten people into leaving cookies and milk but that doesn't seem to be consistent with the whole jolly thing."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Not particularly. I'm just stalling to see if I want to get

involved in something that could ruin my night."

The man dropped his cigarette and crushed it beneath his boot. He looked toward the street, apparently checking to see whether anyone else was nearby, before turning his attention back to Vlad.

"I said keep walking."

Vlad sighed again. He had been hoping to get home before the evening became any more irritating, but this fake Santa was irritating. After all, he threatened the King of Nightmares. The audacity was towering.

There was also the matter of the employees inside the store, whose behavior still bothered him. An armed man dressed as Santa Claus standing behind the building was unlikely to be a coincidence, and Vlad had never been particularly good at leaving an interesting problem alone.

"You're connected to the people inside, aren't you?"

For the first time, the man's expression changed. It was only for a moment, but Vlad noticed it.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't."

The man reached beneath his coat and pulled out the pistol.

Vlad looked at it without moving, "This seems unnecessary and actually, very futile."

"Get moving."

Vlad looked down at the snow-covered pavement and then back at the man.

"No."

The gun went off with a nervous jerk.

The bullet struck Vlad's pants, missing anything important, although the hole it left was going to be annoying

to explain. Vlad stared at the damaged fabric for a moment before raising his eyes to the man.

"You shot my pants. Who shoots a man's pants?!"

The man barely had time to react before Vlad crossed the distance between them, catching the gun hand and twisting the weapon free. He pulled the fake Santa away from the door and drove him backward into the brick wall. The pistol clattered onto the pavement as the robber tried to swing at him with his free hand.

Vlad caught the punch, pushed the man's arm aside, and shoved him hard enough to send him stumbling into a pile of discarded Christmas decorations. The man slipped, grabbed at Vlad's coat, and dragged them both down into the snow.

Vlad landed on top of him and the man stopped struggling, but his relief was short-lived. The ground beneath them was covered in something cold and unpleasant that smelled like spoiled eggnog mixed with a chili dog and regret.

He rolled away from the man and came up on one knee, looking at the mess coating his sleeve.

For several seconds, he said nothing. He stood and examined the damage.

His pants had a bullet hole in them, his coat was filthy, and the sleeve of his shirt had acquired a smell that might never come out.

Christmas was supposed to be a time of peace and goodwill toward men, but Vlad was beginning to think the holiday had been designed specifically to irritate him.

He retrieved the pistol, took the bullets out and threw it into a nearby dumpster.

The Santa suit was in slightly better condition than Vlad's

clothes, which was not saying much.

He knew now, he was going to have to go inside. It was one thing to be a useless blood bag. It was another to be taking advantage of others.

He hated bullies.

But he wasn't going anywhere with vomit on his sleeve and soaked runners.

That's when he looked at the fake Santa.

"This is beneath me," he muttered.

Still, it was a suit, and Vlad had a feeling he would need one if he intended to find out what was happening inside Uncle Wang's Emporium.

He pulled off the man's hat and beard, then considered the rest of the costume.

He put it on anyway.

Vlad finished putting on the large red coat and buttoned it up, looking down at the bright suit with the same expression he might have given a particularly unpleasant stain on an expensive rug.

He glanced at Gerald's bag and then at the Santa hat in his hand.

"I guess I should finish the ensemble so they think it's Mr. Coffin Nails over there, huh?"

Gerald said nothing.

Beside him, a large garbage dumpster had become home to a collection of random trash and now an empty pistol, a half-naked man, and an expensive black suit that had been ruined by the unfortunate combination of eggnog and chili dog.

The suit was uncomfortable and the beard smelled of cigarette smoke. The hat was a little too small. He tried to

adjust it as best he could but gave up. He then picked up his red Christmas bag, and checked that Gerald's new pot was still safely inside.

At least one thing had gone right.

The alley door was smooth on the outside, with a magnetic lock that required a key card to open it. Trying to tear it off the hinges would only draw attention, and the front entrance was out of the question. He looked around for another way inside and noticed a fire escape ladder hanging behind the dumpster.

"Of course."

He could have made a great deal of noise trying to force his way in, but that would bring a lot of noise and for now, he would try to remain silent.

He looked up at the metal fire escape attached to the side of the building.

It wasn't ideal, but it would do.

Vlad tucked the red bag under one arm and began climbing, taking care not to let the oversized Santa coat catch on the railing.

By the time he reached the roof, he was already reconsidering every decision that had brought him to Spokane for Christmas.

He had come to buy a ring for Kevin and a new pot for a cactus.

Now he was climbing a fire escape dressed as Santa Claus, with a hole in his pants and chili dog on his sleeve.

He hoped Kevin appreciated the effort.

CHAPTER THREE
Up On the Rooftop

The ladder rattled beneath his weight, and the cold metal wasn't doing his hands any favors, even through the gloves. By the time he reached the top, he was already tired of the suit, the weather, and the holiday that had brought him here.

Fortunately, there was a roof access hatch. Vlad set the bag down long enough to examine the lock, then quietly pried it open and lifted the hatch. He climbed down into the top floor and pulled the hatch closed behind him.

The store was darker than it should have been. There were no emergency lights illuminating the corridors, and none of the office desk lamps were on. The only thing that seemed to be working properly was the Christmas music, which continued playing somewhere below him as if nothing unusual had happened.

The floor was scattered with offices, some still being used and others seemingly abandoned years ago. Some doors stood open, while others remained shut beneath name plaques belonging to people who might no longer work there. Whatever business had once occupied this part of the building had probably been quite successful in its day, but it now looked like another unfortunate victim of progressive consumerism.

Vlad moved slowly through the hallway, looking through the open doors as he went. Desks were covered with

paperwork, old computer equipment, and the sort of office supplies that nobody seemed to need until they ran out of them.

A few rooms had been cleared out entirely, leaving nothing but empty shelves and marks on the walls where pictures had once hung.

He was looking for anything that might explain what was happening downstairs. The employees had been nervous, the man in the alley had been armed, and Vlad was fairly certain the two events were connected. He didn't know how many men were involved or what they wanted, but he preferred to find out before walking blindly into the middle of it.

Walking past one office, his instincts made him stop. The hairs on the back of his neck were working again, and when he stood still, he thought he heard a child whimpering.

Vlad slowly opened the office door and looked inside. There was nobody standing in the room, and nothing appeared to be moving.

He glanced at Gerald's bag, "If this is stupid, don't say anything."

Gerald said nothing.

Vlad was just about to leave the room when he heard the small voice again. He turned and looked beneath the far desk, where a pair of little shoes were pressed close together.

He crouched down slightly, trying to see who was hiding there.

"Excuse me," he said quietly. "Are you a child or an Imp? Sometimes it's hard to tell just by the feet."

"What's an Imp?"

Vlad paused. "Well, that certainly cuts down the choices. Come out so that I can see you. Crouching like this starts to hurt my knees at this age."

It took a moment, but eventually a small child emerged from beneath the desk. A big head of black, curly hair appeared first, followed by a little girl who looked somewhere between five and six years old. Vlad had never been particularly good at guessing the ages of children. She wore green tights, and her brown skin was almost completely hidden beneath a bright red Christmas sweater featuring a puppy dressed as an elf.

Vlad looked at her, then at the desk she had been hiding under.

"What were you doing under there?"

"Hiding."

"And why is that?"

"Because of the men downstairs. They took my daddy."

Vlad exhaled hard through his nose. The night had begun with wet shoes, moved on to a ruined suit, and now appeared to involve a kidnapping.

He hated this holiday.

"Why did they take him?"

She shrugged.

Vlad studied her for a moment, trying to decide what to ask next. He had dealt with kings, armies, and people who thought they could bargain with him, but talking to a frightened child was a different sort of problem.

"Have your parents named you?"

She nodded.

"And what did they end up calling you?"

"My name's Hope."

Vlad took a moment and whispered to himself, "Of course it is."

He stood up and straightened the oversized Santa coat before attempting an introduction.

"Well, Ms. Hope. I am—"

"Santa. I know."

It took Vlad a moment to remember what he was wearing.

"No, dear, my name is—"

"Santa."

"No. I am not Mr. Claus. I'm—"

"Santa."

"You keep doing that. Stop doing that."

"It's okay. I won't tell anybody."

"Clearly, I am not Santa. I am only wearing this ridiculously loud costume because my suit had an unfortunate accident with someone's regurgitation."

"What's that?"

"Puke."

Hope seemed satisfied with that answer, but then she pointed at the Christmas bag he was still holding.

"No, that."

"Oh."

Vlad set the bag on the desk and reached inside, pulling out the small pot containing the rolled cactus plant. He held it up so she could see it.

"This is Gerald. He does not talk, so don't expect him to."

Hope walked over and made a motion as though she were petting the cactus without actually touching it.

"Hello, Gerald."

She looked up at Vlad.

"Is he helping you deliver presents?"

"Again, I am not Santa. For one, look how much skinnier I am. This suit is baggy. And where is my large beard?"

"You shaved it a little. My dad shaves."

Vlad looked at her, then at the beard attached to his costume. He was beginning to understand that arguing with this child was not going to be as easy as he had hoped. Still, he had one last idea that might settle the matter.
He lowered his sunglasses, letting Hope see the bright ember of his pupils.

"Are these the eyes of an old fat man who only works once a year?"

Hope stepped closer and touched his sunglasses.

"They're magic eyes. So pretty."

"No, they are not. They are the eyes of a predator. The stuff of nightmares."

"It's a cool yellow."

Vlad pushed his sunglasses back into place and stood tall. He had intended to tell her the truth, and he was quite certain the truth would settle the matter once and for all. "Hope. I am about to tell you something that will change your view on Christmas."

She looked up at him and cocked her head, ready to listen.

Vlad was about to tell her the truth. The truth of the holiday, the truth of the myth, and the truth about the ridiculous man in the red suit who was supposed to visit every house in the world in a single night.

But then he remembered being her age. He remembered the wonder of the season, the way he and his brothers used to talk endlessly about the festivities and the things they

would do together. He remembered what it was like to believe that something wonderful was waiting just around the corner.

Hope's father had been taken, and she was hiding in an office because she was frightened of the men downstairs. Telling her that Santa wasn't real, especially now, would only give her one more reason to remember this Christmas as a terrible day. Vlad had no interest in making her feel worse than she already did.

He hated this holiday, but he hated the feeling of guilt even more.

"Fine. I am Santa. And I need you to stay here while I go get your father."

Hope grabbed at his jacket, "Please don't leave me."

"I will leave Gerald to watch over you."

"But he's just a plant. He can't even run."

"Yes, but he's a very good listener. I can't have you coming with me because I might have to kil—" Vlad stopped himself and corrected his words. "I might have to hurt some people."

"Do you really have to?"

He smirked. "It's kind of my brand."

"But you can't hurt people on Christmas."

"Ah, but it's only Christmas Eve. This is a fortunate loophole for me."

"Santa doesn't hurt people."

"But it may be the only way to save your father."

Hope thought for a moment before asking the question Vlad had been hoping she wouldn't.

"What about killing?"

Vlad smirked again.

"You absolutely can't kill people on Christmas. What would their moms and dads say?"

"Probably something about how they failed as parents, I would guess."

Hope considered this, apparently unconvinced.

"What about if you just inc... incampass... incampassationed them?"

"You mean incapacitated?"

"Yeah, that."

Vlad exhaled hard through his nose. He was beginning to suspect that finding the father would be considerably easier than negotiating the terms under which he was allowed to do so.

"If I agree to this, can I go and get this done so I can be home before morning?"

Hope held out her hand, extending her smallest finger. "Pinky swear."

Vlad looked at her extended hand, curled into a fist with the exception of her smallest finger sticking out.

"I'm sorry. What is this?"

"Pinky swear. Wrap your pinky around mine and swear you won't really hurt anyone hard. Just a little."

"And to what laws am I bound if I fail?"

"Just do it."

Vlad looked at her outstretched finger. He had made promises to kings and broken promises to people who deserved it, but he had never been asked to bind himself to a child's pinky. He supposed there was a first time for everything.

He held out his hand, wrapped his smallest finger around hers, and said, "I vow to not joyfully hurt, maim, or kill

anyone of the bad men and instead, just hurt them... just enough."

"Why did you say 'joyfully'?"

"That was just for me."

Hope looked up at him, still holding his finger.

"And you'll promise to get my dad?"

Vlad's expression softened a little, although he would never have admitted it.

"Yes."

He released her hand and reached for Gerald's bag. He had come to the city to buy a ring for Kevin and a pot for a cactus, and he had somehow ended up dressed as Santa, negotiating with a little girl in an office while armed criminals occupied the floors below.

He looked down at Hope.

"Stay here. I mean it."

Then he turned toward the hallway, already regretting the promise he had just made.

CHAPTER FOUR
All I Want for Christmas Is My Dad

Vlad looked down at Hope and then back toward the long hallway. She was standing exactly where he had left her, holding Gerald with both hands and extending her arms as though she were presenting the cactus to a royal audience.

The oversized Santa suit made Vlad feel ridiculous enough without having to watch a little girl carry a potted plant around like a precious family heirloom.

He adjusted the gloves on his hands and looked toward the stairwell. Somewhere below, the men who had taken Hope's father were going about their business, presumably unaware that their evening was about to become considerably more complicated.

Whispering back to her, he said, "I need you to stay here, okay?"

Hope looked past him toward the hallway, "But why?"

"We have been through this. It could get very dangerous."

Her eyes narrowed. "But you're Santa."

"And you are five."

"Six."

"I should get credit for getting so close."

Hope frowned at him, apparently unimpressed by his ability to estimate the age of a child. For decades, Vlad had dealt with Kings and Queens. Dictators and Emperors.

People who considered themselves the most powerful people in the world. Yet somehow, this little girl was proving to be one of the more persistent obstacles he had encountered in recent memory.

He pointed toward the office where he had found her.

“Promise me. Do not go looking for me. I will find your father and bring him back.”

“What if you need help?”

“Between you and the cactus, the cactus would actually be more useful in a fight.”

“What if you get hurt?”

“I won’t.”

“What if you die?”

Vlad stared at her for a moment. Children had a remarkable talent for asking questions that adults generally avoided, although he suspected this one was simply trying to find a way around his instructions.

“If I die, I officially bind you to be Gerald's legal guardian.”

He saw her eyes look down at his coat, then at the blood on his sleeve from the man downstairs. The dark stain stood out against the bright red fabric, which was unfortunate because Vlad had been trying to maintain at least some semblance of a convincing Santa costume for his subterfuge.

“You’re already hurt.”

Vlad glanced at the spot and tasted it. “That isn’t my blood.”

“Okay.”

Vlad turned away, then quickly turned back saying, “Okay? I tasted blood in front of you and you simply say ‘okay’?”

“Santa never lies.”

“That’s Superman.”

He started down the hallway before Hope could ask another question. He had already spent more time explaining himself than he would have liked, and the longer he stood there, the greater the chance that one of the criminals would discover the unexpected guest wandering around their building. Vlad was perfectly comfortable with that possibility in theory, but he preferred to choose the time and place of his introductions.

The fourth floor of Uncle Wang’s Emporium looked nothing like the cheerful department store below. Most of the fluorescent lights were either blinking yellow and brown or simply burned out, leaving only the glow from displays that had been left plugged in for the Christmas season. Rows of artificial trees stood along the walls, some decorated with lights and ornaments while others remained in cardboard boxes with bright yellow sales tags.

Tables were covered in artificial snow that displayed plastic reindeer, inflatable Santas, and enough red and green decorations to make Vlad feel as though he'd been roofied by a careless hippie.

There were even a few oversized nutcracker dolls standing guard beside a display of artificial wreaths. Their painted smiles and stiff wooden expressions were unsettling in a way Vlad couldn't quite explain. Perhaps it was the eyes. Cartoonish, but with a small sense of realism behind them.

The floor was also considerably colder than the store below. A draft worked its way through the old building, stirring the loose edges of cardboard boxes and making a string of battery-operated bells tinkle against a plastic snowman. Vlad glanced at the display as he passed,

wondering whether the bells were supposed to sound that irritating or whether the batteries were dying.

He decided he didn't care.

The building was larger than it appeared from outside. The stairwell had probably been added when the upper floors were converted into storage and offices, and the narrow passageways between the displays made it difficult to see very far ahead.

Vlad moved quietly between the merchandise, keeping his eyes open for anything that might explain the suspicious employees, the armed man in the alley, and the reason the entire building seemed to have been abandoned by everyone who wasn't involved in whatever was happening downstairs.

Somewhere below him, he could hear voices and something else, a slight humming that he couldn't quite identify. One voice was shouting, another answered, and then there was silence.

Vlad continued toward the stairs, slowing when he smelled the overabundance of Axe body spray and the faint aroma of blueberry vape smoke before he heard the man's voice.

“It's Sam. I'm... I'm checking the...”

Radio static crackled through a walkie-talkie, sputtering like the batteries were dying.

“This is... it's Sam and these bargain-brand walkie-talkies suck, man! Can anyone even hear me?”

Vlad stopped beside a display of artificial wreaths. The voice was close, coming from the other side of a row of Christmas trees. He could hear the man tapping at the walkie-talkie, followed by another burst of static and a

muttered complaint.

Sam came around the corner, holding a handgun in one hand and the dying walkie-talkie in the other. He was also wearing a Santa hat, which sat crookedly on his head and did little to improve his appearance.

Vlad froze and stared at him.

Sam froze and stared back.

Neither seemed particularly impressed with the other and for a moment, the two men stood among the artificial trees and plastic decorations, each apparently trying to decide whether the other belonged there.

Sam looked at Vlad's red suit, then at his beard, then at his face. Vlad returned the favor by examining Sam's gun, his walkie-talkie, and finally the ridiculous hat.

“You're not Bill,” Sam said.

Vlad looked at the gun, the walkie-talkie, then back at the man.

“And your walkie-talkie is broken.”

Sam raised the gun, and Vlad sighed to himself, “Everyone keeps doing that.”

Sam tried to pull the trigger, but Vlad moved before the gun could fire, catching Sam's wrist, twisted the weapon away, and driving him backward into a stack of large plastic candy canes.

The display collapsed with a hollow clatter, sending red-and-white props rolling across the floor. One struck the foot of a nutcracker doll, which wobbled dangerously before settling back into place.

Sam stumbled over the fallen merchandise and tried to regain his balance.

He grabbed one of the candy canes and swung it at Vlad

with both hands, apparently believing that a festive piece of plastic might somehow compensate for the fact that his opponent didn't have a weapon.

Vlad caught the prop, pulled it from his hands, and shoved him against the wall again warning, “You really should stop doing that.”

Sam struggled, twisting and pushing at Vlad's arms, but it quickly became apparent that he was considerably outmatched.

Vlad held him in place with one hand while the candy cane remained tucked under his other arm.

“Who are you?” Sam asked, his voice shaking.

Vlad pulled him close, extended his fangs, and said in a low tone, “I'm Santa.”

He tossed Sam against the wall again but this time, hard enough to knock him out. The man's walkie-talkie slipped from his belt and landed among the fallen candy canes, where it continued to spit out static. Vlad waited a moment to make sure Sam wasn't about to get back up, then looked down at him.

He noticed that during the struggle his Santa hat had fallen off. He picked it up and considered putting it back on, but decided against it, tossing it onto the unconscious man's chest instead. The hat landed crookedly over Sam's shoulder, making him look as though he had fallen asleep after one too many drinks at a holiday office party.

Vlad was concentrating on brushing a few bits of fake snow from his coat, which is why he received a slight shock when he saw Hope standing behind him, holding Gerald.

Vlad closed his eyes and took a long breath, exhaling forcibly through his nose.

“I told you to stay.”

“I was scared.”

“You were supposed to stay there and guard Gerald.”

“He wanted to come.”

“Gerald does not speak.”

“He spoke to me.”

Vlad cocked his head to the side and squinted, looking from Hope to the cactus. Gerald remained as silent as ever, displaying none of the gratitude Vlad would have expected from a plant that had just been dragged into the middle of a criminal investigation.

“You'll excuse me if I don't believe you.”

Hope looked around at the scattered decorations, the fallen candy canes, and the unconscious man beneath the nutcrackers and Christmas tree.

“I want to find my dad.”

“What do you think I'm doing? I could be home watching Krampus take children away.”

“Is that in a movie?”

“No.”

Hope looked down at the man trapped beneath the fallen decorations.

“Is that guy dead?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Vlad looked at her. There was no hesitation in her answer, no curiosity about whether the man deserved what had happened to him. She simply seemed relieved that he was still alive.

“You really are serious about this Christmas rule.”

Hope nodded. “My dad says every life matters to

someone.”

“Yes, but not to me,” Vlad said, shaking his head as he continued toward the stairs.

"You don't have anyone close to you."

"I suppose Kevin."

"And wouldn't you feel bad if someone hurt him?"

Vlad thought for a moment and then heel turned.

Hope followed.

Vlad looked over his shoulder. “Stay close.”

She smiled. “I knew you would let me come.”

“I am not letting you come with me. I just realize because of your child-sized brain, you are unable to follow orders.”

Hope didn't seem particularly offended. She held Gerald securely against her sweater and hurried to keep up as Vlad made his way down the next flight of stairs. He had no intention of letting her out of his sight now. If she was going to ignore every instruction he gave her, then the least he could do was make sure she didn't wander into the path of someone carrying something more dangerous than a plastic candy cane.

The sounds from below were becoming easier to hear. People were talking, doors were opening and closing, and somewhere on the lower floors someone shouted that they needed another man.

Vlad slowed as they approached the landing, listening to the voices echo through the stairwell. The criminals were moving around the building, and their conversations suggested that whatever they were doing required more people than they currently had available.

That was useful information, although Vlad would have preferred to obtain it without having a six-year-old and a

cactus in tow.

He stopped and held out his hand to keep Hope from moving farther down, pushing her behind him.

“What?”

“Quiet.”

They stood on the landing. A man's voice came through a walkie-talkie from somewhere below, distorted by static but loud enough for Vlad to understand every word.

“Check the fourth floor again.”

“We already did.”

“Then check it again! Bill hasn't checked in from the alley, now Sam hasn't checked in. We might have a straggler.”

“There was nobody up there.”

“There was somebody. We have another loose hostage or security guard somewhere in the building. Find him.”

Vlad and Hope looked at each other.

“You heard that too?” she whispered.

“Of course I did.”

“Are they looking for my dad?”

Vlad shook his head.

“No.”

He looked toward the stairwell, listening as the voice crackled again through the walkie-talkie. The men downstairs had noticed that two of their own were missing, and they were beginning to understand that someone had interfered with their plans. Vlad adjusted the sleeves of his Santa suit, glanced at the blood on his cuff, and gave a small, humorless smile.

“They're looking for me.”

CHAPTER FIVE
The Nutcracker, Sweet

For the first time since she had followed him, Hope looked genuinely frightened.

Vlad put a hand on her shoulder. He knew from experience that this gesture made humans feel comfortable. Probably because he was so powerful, they felt they were safe. He was sure that was it.

He had never really understood why people needed reassurance when faced with danger, particularly when the danger was usually something he could deal with in a few seconds.

Still, Hope was a child, and apparently children required a little more encouragement than the average person before walking into a building full of armed criminals.

He had to remind himself not every child was trained to rule a country by age fourteen.

“Don't worry.”

“Are you going to fight them?”

“Probably.”

“How many?”

“If history is any indication, all of them.”

Vlad listened as the voice crackled through the walkie-talkie again.

“Two of you go up. Search every floor. If you find him, don't let him get away.”

The footsteps began almost immediately. Vlad looked

toward the stairwell and then at Hope, who was still holding Gerald with both hands.

There were plenty of places to hide an adult in a department store, but a talkative child carrying a cactus was a different matter. He could already imagine the questions she would ask if he told her to crouch behind a box, and the likelihood of her answering one of the criminals if they asked 'is anyone there' was even worse.

He picked her up and ran back through the store toward the offices. Hope clutched Gerald as Vlad moved between the displays, his bright red coat flapping behind him.

He tried to keep his steps quiet, although the bells and plastic ornaments rattling around him made that more difficult than it should have been.

He spotted a display of Christmas wreaths stacked against the wall and slowed down. It wasn't an ideal hiding place, but it was the best he had at the moment. He set Hope down beside the wreaths and leaned toward her.

“Get behind those.”

She moved quickly, squeezing herself into the space between the wall and the wreaths.

Vlad was about to turn away when he noticed how tightly she was holding Gerald, “And be careful of Gerald. This has been a big day for him so far.”

Hope nodded solemnly and disappeared behind the wreaths.

Vlad stepped into the middle of the hallway and waited. He could hear the footsteps approaching, accompanied by the occasional scrape of a shoe against the floor. One of the men muttered something about finding the intruder, while the other told him to shut up and keep moving.

Vlad adjusted his gloves and glanced at the decorations surrounding him. If this was going to turn into another fight, he hoped the store had something more useful than plastic candy canes.

Two men appeared around the corner. One carried a handgun, while the other held a baseball bat. Both looked as though they had been hired for a job that required very little thinking.

The man with the gun spotted him first, “There he is.”

Vlad glanced at the bat with a small grin, “You're going to need something bigger.”

The man with the gun raised his weapon and fired. Vlad moved sideways, and the bullet struck the wall behind him. A small piece of plaster fell to the floor, joining the artificial snow and loose bits of tinsel that already littered the room.

The man with the bat charged as Vlad grabbed a large plastic dreidel from a nearby display and held it in front of him just as the bat came swinging down. The impact smashed the toy prop apart, sending pieces of painted plastic scattering into the air.

Vlad stared at the remains in his hand, “I think that might be bad luck.”

The man swung again. Vlad ducked, grabbed a string of lights hanging from the nearby display, and pulled hard enough to tip the entire thing forward. The display came down with a clatter, taking the bat-wielding man with it. Boxes of decorations slid across the floor, and a plastic snowman rolled onto its side.

The second man tried to move around his partner. Vlad caught him by the jacket and threw him into a display of inflatable reindeer.

The brown toy balloons squeaked as he hit them, sending the lightweight decorations flying in every direction.

One reindeer bounced off a table, another rolled into a stack of cardboard boxes, and a third became entangled around the man's legs.

He tried to stand up, but his hands kept pushing through the rubber reindeer as the inflatable animals shifted around him.

Vlad grabbed a three-foot nutcracker from a nearby table as the man finally managed to get to his feet, still struggling with the inflatable decorations.

Vlad stepped forward and struck him directly in the crotch with the new weapon and the man crumpled to the ground, wheezing.

Vlad smirked, proud of the irony. There was something satisfying about a nutcracker being used for its intended purpose, even if the manufacturer probably hadn't imagined this particular application. He followed up with a blow to the man's head, knocking him out cold.

The bat-wielding criminal crawled out of the broken display and charged again.

Vlad watched him approach and smiled, “Clearly, you are new at this.”

The man swung the bat wildly. Vlad stepped aside, letting the first swing pass harmlessly in front of him, then ducked the second. The criminal was putting so much effort into hitting him that he seemed unaware of how little progress he was making.

Finally, Vlad caught the bat in mid-swing and held it firmly in place, “Stop this. You're embarrassing yourself.”

The man stared at Vlad, now holding the bat as though it

were nothing more than a child's toy.

“What the hell are you?”

Vlad adjusted his sunglasses enough to let the man see the vampire's amber pupils glowing beneath them.

“I'm the ghost of Christmas nutcrackers.”

The man looked confused.

Vlad shrugged.

“Look, they all can't be zingers. It's late, and I haven't had a drink all night.”

The man let go of the bat and tried to run but Vlad caught him by the jacket collar and pulled him backward before he could get very far. He brought the man down to the floor and tried to punch him, hoping to end the conflict before it became any more tedious.

Unfortunately, the man's fear made him move quicker than Vlad expected. He twisted at precisely the wrong moment, and Vlad's fist struck the floor instead.

“Ah!” Vlad exclaimed.

He pulled his hand back and examined it. There was nothing particularly wrong with it, but that didn't mean he appreciated the experience. He had been punched, stabbed, shot at, and subjected to countless other indignities over the centuries, yet there was something especially irritating about hurting his hand on a floor while trying to subdue a man who smelled like cheap aftershave.

The criminal scrambled away as Vlad stood up.

“Oh, no, you don't.”

Vlad chased after him.

The frightened man hid behind a display of five-foot-tall wooden nutcrackers. Their painted faces stared straight ahead, their mouths frozen in broad smiles, and their

brightly colored uniforms looked ridiculous even by the standards of Christmas merchandise. The man crouched between them, apparently convinced that hiding behind something tall would make him invisible.

Vlad reached through the smiling decorations to grab him, but his oversized Santa sleeve caught on one of the wooden figures.

Instead of catching the man cleanly, Vlad ended up wedging the nutcracker between them.

He tugged at his sleeve.

The nutcracker didn't move.

The man ducked another swing and turned to run toward the stairs, dragging the nutcracker and Vlad with him.

The wooden figure scraped across the floor, its painted boots knocking against the display tables as the three of them stumbled through the store.

Vlad tried to free himself without losing his grip on the criminal, but the more he pulled, the more firmly the sleeve seemed to be caught.

“Well, this is just embarrassing for all of us.”

The man almost made it to the stairs before he tripped going down hard, taking the five-foot statue and Vlad's full weight on top of him.

The nutcracker landed across the man's legs, and Vlad's shoulder struck the floor beside him.

The criminal stopped moving.

Vlad remained where he was for a moment, looking at the ceiling and reconsidering several of the choices that had brought him to this point. He had once commanded armies. He had stood against men who believed themselves invincible. Now he was lying on the floor of a department

store, wearing a Santa suit, with a wooden soldier on top of him and an unconscious criminal beneath it.
He pushed the nutcracker aside rolled over and checked the man's pulse.

He was alive and Vlad thought about how his 'Pinky Promise' bond was still intact.

He got to his feet, straightened his sunglasses, brushed off his coat, and walked back toward the wreaths.

Hope had watched the entire fight from behind the display. She poked her head out as he approached, still holding Gerald.

“Are you all right?”

Vlad checked his sleeve to make sure it was no longer attached to anything. "I'm fine.”

Hope nodded with a slight smile "Because you're Santa.”

“Still not Santa.”

He stood motionless for a moment, staring at the stairwell. The two men were out of the way for now, but the gunfire and the noise from the displays had probably attracted attention.

He had no idea how many criminals remained in the building, and the ones he had encountered so far hadn't exactly demonstrated an impressive ability to think ahead. That didn't make them harmless. In fact, stupid people with guns could be considerably more dangerous than intelligent people with them, particularly when they were frightened.
Hope noticed that he had gone quiet.

“What'cha thinking about?”

“These people are stupid, but still dangerous. And they are holding hostages. This scenario has become very volatile. I am going to have to find the rest of them and ki— knock...

knock them out for this to end."

Hope just looked at him.

Vlad cleared his throat and glanced toward the stairs again.

"Any chance you'd stay here?"

Hope shook her head.

Vlad sighed. He could have argued, threatened, or tried to explain the situation in greater detail, but he was beginning to understand that none of those approaches would have the desired effect. Hope had made up her mind about finding her father, and she seemed to believe that a promise from Santa was more reliable than any instruction he could give her.

"If nothing else, I admire your sense of duty to your father."

They walked toward the other end of the store. Hope slipped her hand into his, and Vlad was too busy thinking about a strategy to notice right away.

He was trying to work out where the remaining criminals might be stationed and whether there was a way to reach the lower floors without walking straight into another armed encounter. The building's layout was confusing, and the stairs offered very little cover if someone was waiting below. Hope gave his hand a little tug.

"Where's your dad?" she asked.

Vlad looked down at their joined hands but did not remove hers.

"He is dead. Long ago."

"That's too bad. Do you miss him?"

"It was seven hundred years ago. I feel I'm over it."

Hope seemed to consider this answer, perhaps trying to

work out how anyone could miss a parent for so long or how someone could live for seven hundred years in the first place.

Vlad didn't offer an explanation. He had no intention of discussing his family history in the middle of a department store while armed men searched for him, especially when the subject was unlikely to improve his mood.

“Do you have a mom?”

“Also dead.”

“What about Missus Claus?”

“There is no Mrs. Claus.”

“I thought you were married.”

“There have been many brides, but I do not remember a Claus. There was a Klaus once, but she is also dead.”

Hope looked up at him.

“So you live alone?”

“I have Gerald. And Kevin, my assistant.”

“Is Kevin an elf?”

“Kevin excels in breaking things, not fixing them.”

Hope seemed satisfied with this explanation. Vlad was not sure whether that was because she understood what he meant or because she had simply decided that Kevin sounded like an interesting person. Either way, she continued holding his hand as they approached the stairs to the third floor.

Vlad paused to look down the stairwell. He could hear movement somewhere below, although nothing suggested that another group was about to come charging up at them. He gave Hope's hand a small squeeze, then led her down.

The third floor looked as though it had been used primarily for storage. Halloween decorations were lined up

against the walls beside boxes of St. Patrick's Day merchandise. Some Valentine's Day party supplies had spilled onto the floor and were now spreading into the July Fourth banners. There were plastic skeletons, green hats, heart-shaped balloons, and a box of miniature American flags that had apparently been opened and abandoned months earlier.

The smell was different down here, too. The artificial pine and cinnamon of the Christmas floor had given way to cardboard, dust, and the faint odor of old plastic. Vlad passed a skeleton wearing a leprechaun hat and wondered whether the store's management had any idea what it was doing with its inventory. He supposed it was possible that the entire building was simply a monument to merchandise nobody wanted.

"Stay behind me," he told Hope.

"You're magic."

"I am not magic."

"You can't get hurt."

"I get hurt all the time."

"You didn't get hurt by the gun."

"It missed."

"You moved really fast."

"That's because I'm a vam—"

Hope smiled at him.

Vlad stopped himself. There was no point in explaining what he was. He had already tried to convince her he wasn't Santa, and that conversation had been an exhausting waste of time. Besides, he was beginning to suspect that Hope would interpret almost anything he said as further evidence that she was right.

He looked down at her and let out a slow breath. “I apologize. I just don't find this holiday as joyful as most people.”

“Is it because there's a lot of bad people? Are you losing your Christmas spirit?”

“That spirit was taken from me long ago.”

Hope looked at the two unconscious men they had left upstairs, then back at Vlad. She didn't seem frightened now. If anything, she looked as though she had been given a problem that she was determined to solve.

“We can get it back.”

Vlad stopped and looked down at her, “Your optimism is almost crippling.”

CHAPTER SIX
Do They Know It's Christmas Time?

Pete wasn't the kind of criminal to get nervous. He was actually too confident in himself to ever have doubts, which was a fault that got him into trouble but also something that helped him be the leader his dad would've been proud of.

At least, that was how Pete saw it. Other people might have described him as arrogant, impulsive, and entirely too pleased with his own ideas, but those people generally weren't in a position to tell him what they thought.

Pete had learned a long time ago that confidence could get you through a lot.

His father had been particularly good at that. "Take whatever you can from anyone," was the family creed. His dad had lived by it, and Pete had grown up believing that the world was divided into two kinds of people: those who took what they wanted and those who let them.

His father had been in the first group, right up until the authorities caught up with him. Now he was serving time in Folsom prison, where he presumably had plenty of opportunities to think about the consequences of his life choices.

Pete wondered if his dad would ever find out about tonight's plan he'd concocted, but sometimes news was hard to come by in solitary.

He hoped his father would be proud. More importantly, he hoped he would hear about the money. Pete had spent years listening to stories about the jobs his father had pulled, the things he'd stolen, and the times he'd narrowly escaped getting caught. Some of the stories had probably been exaggerated, but Pete had never bothered to question them.

They were family history, and family history was supposed to make you feel good about yourself.

Now it was his turn to make a name for himself.

He'd gathered his team, he'd stolen the hardware, and he'd spent the last month planning this night. There had been a lot of work involved, more than he'd originally expected, but he was convinced it would all pay off. The equipment had been collected, the roles assigned, and the timing had all worked out. He'd even watched a week's worth of heist movies to make sure he understood the finer points of pulling off a complicated robbery.

He was particularly fond of *Ocean's Eleven*. The way Danny Ocean and his crew managed to coordinate everything, anticipate every problem, and walk away with the money, had always impressed him. Pete had watched it enough times to believe he understood the method behind it all. He had even tried to explain the plan to the others using some of the terminology he'd picked up, although most of them seemed more interested in knowing how much they were getting paid.

That was their problem. Pete was the mastermind. They were the help.

The problem was that he hadn't counted on a group of tourists shopping for one last present.

The store should have been nearly empty by the time

they moved in. It was Christmas Eve, and most sensible people had already finished their shopping and gone home. Instead, a handful of last-minute shoppers had wandered in, looking for gifts they could have bought weeks ago if they'd had any sense of organization.

Now he had hostages.

Too many, actually. Twenty in all.

They sat together in a small area they'd been ordered towards. Men and women crowded close enough that some were practically sitting on each other's feet. A few had been crying since the moment the guns came out. Others kept looking toward the exits, as though they might discover an unlocked door that everyone else had somehow overlooked.

One woman had been trying to calm an older man who kept asking whether the police had been called. A younger shopper had his hands clasped together and was quietly repeating something under his breath.

Pete had never really understood why people prayed when they were frightened. If there was someone listening who could fix the situation, he would rich from the bets he made and wouldn't have to be here.

The pleas of "I have a family" and "It's not my time" had finally been shut down when he threatened them with his rifle. He hadn't wanted to waste ammunition, and he certainly didn't want to shoot anybody unless he had to. Dead hostages would complicate things, and complications were the sort of thing a mastermind was supposed to avoid. Danny Ocean never had to deal with hostages. Why should he?

He then convinced himself that they were only hostages. They weren't supposed to be part of the plan, and once the

job was finished, the police could come in and deal with them. Pete had no intention of hurting anyone who didn't give him a reason.

That was what he told himself, anyway.

He smiled when he thought of himself as Danny Ocean. After this, his crew would head to Vegas where the real money was. He was always destined to be a mastermind. The money was going to be good, the plan was going to work, and when it was all over, he'd have a story worth telling. Maybe one day someone would make a movie about him.

But right now, he was missing a few people, and he was desperate to find out why.

Two of his group had not checked in when they should have, and now two more were radio silent. He'd already sent men to check the upper floors, but the updates hadn't come through. He kept glancing at the walkie-talkie beside him, waiting for someone to report that everything was fine and that the missing men had simply been delayed.

He didn't like delays. Delays were how plans fell apart. He'd stolen and "borrowed" too many things for this night to go wrong, and he was now getting visibly upset. The longer the silence continued, the more he began to wonder whether someone had made a mistake.

He'd gone over the plan with everyone. He'd explained what they needed to do, when they needed to do it, and why they needed to follow instructions. He'd even repeated himself when some of them looked confused.

What more could he have done?

Another member of his group, Michelle, came up behind him. He thought having a woman on his team would be a

good idea in case they needed someone seduced. He'd really thought of everything and didn't once regret watching a week's worth of heist movies. All that time studying them had really paid off.

Michelle had never been particularly impressed with Pete's theories about women, but she had learned that arguing with him was rarely worth the effort.

He had a talent for explaining his own mistakes as though they were someone else's fault, and he could turn even a simple conversation into a lecture about how clever he was. She generally saved her energy for things that mattered.

"You okay, Pete?" she asked.

Michelle was always a loner, but when Pete promised her more money than she'd ever make in a year hustling drunks at pool, she jumped at the opportunity. She had to pretend to care about this group of idiots until she was paid and then she was gone.

She had spent enough time around desperate people to know the difference between someone who was dangerous and someone who confident of being dangerous. Pete was somewhere in the middle. He had a plan, and he had managed to get everyone into position, but his confidence sometimes made him forget that other people were capable of doing things he hadn't anticipated.

She wasn't going to tell him that, of course. Not while he was holding a rifle and worrying about his missing men.

"I'm fine," Pete shot back. "Go downstairs and see how much longer Sean is going to need. We need to speed this up."

Michelle looked at him for a moment, then glanced toward the hostages. One of the women had started crying

again, and Knuckles was staring at her as though he was deciding whether the noise was annoying enough to warrant another threat.

Michelle had no desire to spend the night babysitting frightened shoppers. She'd signed up for a robbery, not a room full of people who needed constant reminding that the men holding them had guns. Still, the job was the job, and she wanted her money.

"Sure," she said.

She left without another word, heading toward the stairs that led down to the lower floors. Pete watched her go, then turned his attention back to the hostages.

With Michelle gone, only Pete and the man she knew as Knuckles remained to watch them. Knuckles wasn't much for conversation. His nickname was apparently a reference to his preferred method of settling disagreements, and Pete had never asked whether it was a name he'd earned or one he'd given himself. Either way, he looked like someone who could make a bad situation worse without much effort.

"Everyone stay where you are," Pete announced, although nobody had made any attempt to leave. "We're almost finished here. If you cooperate, you'll all get out of this just fine."

A man near the back raised his head.

"Are you going to let us go?"

Pete looked at him as if he'd asked a particularly stupid question.

"Eventually."

"When?"

"When we're done."

"Done with what?"

Pete tightened his grip on the rifle.

"Do you want to keep asking questions, or do you want to go home to your family?"

The man lowered his head. Pete considered that a satisfactory end to the conversation. He didn't understand why people couldn't simply follow instructions. If everyone did what they were told, this would be a much easier job.
He reached into his pocket and pulled out his vape. One small puff helped ease his mind, and he leaned back in the large velvet-draped chair the store had built for its Santa. The chair was decorated with gold trim and a ridiculous amount of fake fur, and a small sign beside it invited children to sit on Santa's lap for a photograph.

Pete had thought about moving it when they took over the floor, but there was something amusing about sitting in it while holding a rifle. He looked like the sort of man who could give you a present or ruin your life, depending on what you asked for.

He took another look at the walkie-talkie.

Still nothing.

Pete frowned and tapped the side of the device, as though the missing men might suddenly remember their responsibilities if he reminded the equipment that it was supposed to be working.
He'd planned for the police, the timing, the equipment, and the route out. He'd even considered what to do if one of the hostages got sick. What he hadn't planned for was losing contact with his own people before the job was finished.
He took another puff from his vape and settled deeper into Santa's chair.
Everything was still under control.

At least, it would be as soon as someone answered the radio.

CHAPTER SEVEN
You're a Mean One

Vlad and Hope had made their way through half of the third floor, passing boxes of decorations that looked as though they hadn't been opened in years. The aisles were narrow, and the merchandise had been stacked wherever there was room, leaving them to navigate around cardboard boxes, tangled strings of lights, and the occasional inflatable holiday figure that had lost most of its air. Vlad was beginning to wonder whether Uncle Wang's Emporium had ever thrown anything away. Judging by the condition of the merchandise, the answer was probably no.

Hope walked beside him, still holding Gerald carefully against her sweater. She had been unusually quiet since the fight with the two men upstairs, although Vlad suspected it was only a matter of time before she found something else to ask him.

Sure enough, she gently tugged on the sleeve of his Santa jacket.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Vlad whispered back, "This is really not the time."

"I just think maybe you could spend Christmas with your family. Maybe that would help your Christmas spirit."

"My Christmas spirit is fine. My patience is another story." Hope seemed to accept that for the moment, although she continued looking up at him as they walked. Vlad knew that silence from a child rarely meant the conversation was over.

It generally meant the next question was being prepared.

The third floor seemed to go on forever in a maze of neglected holiday merchandise and decorations that had missed their appointed seasons. Halloween skeletons hung from hooks beside boxes of Valentine's Day hearts. A stack of plastic shamrocks leaned against a display of American flags, and a faded banner advertising a New Year's sale had been shoved halfway beneath a shelf.

The overhead lights buzzed softly, and somewhere farther down the floor, a loose piece of metal tapped against a shelf whenever the ventilation system kicked on.

He turned a corner, then stopped.

Something had changed. It was nothing he could identify at first. The tapping had stopped. The air carried the stale smell of cardboard, old plastic, and something sharper beneath it. Someone had been here recently. Someone close.

Vlad glanced down at Hope and raised one finger to his lips. She nodded, though her eyes immediately began searching the shadows around them.

A skeleton in a tattered black robe hung from a display near the next aisle. Its plastic jaw rested against its chest, and one bony hand dangled almost to the floor. Behind it, a stack of boxes had been pushed out of alignment. Vlad watched them for a moment, waiting for the small movement that would tell him what he already suspected.

Nothing happened.

He started forward again, more slowly this time.

"Vlad?" Hope whispered.

"What?"

"Why did you stop?"

“I was admiring the merchandise.”

She didn’t look convinced. Neither was he.

A noise came from behind the skeleton. Not a footstep. More like fabric brushing cardboard.

Vlad turned.

A huge man rose from behind the Halloween display, unfolding himself from a crouch with the unhurried confidence of someone who had never needed to worry about fitting through a doorway. He was enormous, at least six foot seven, with broad shoulders and arms that looked as if they had been built for lifting things other people preferred to leave where they were. His gaze landed first on Hope, then moved to Vlad.

For half a second, he seemed almost pleased to have found them. His hand came up with a gun.

Vlad moved before the man finished raising it and shoved Hope hard behind a stack of boxes marked JULY FOURTH DECORATIONS.

Vlad hit the man's arm hard, knocking the gun away. It struck a metal shelf with a sharp, ringing impact. A plastic string of stars dropped from above and fluttered to the floor between them.

Hope screamed.

“Stay down!” Vlad shouted.

The man, Brad, was already coming at him.

Vlad had expected a gunman to keep his distance but Brad apparently had other ideas. He charged through the narrow aisle, his boots crunching over fallen decorations. Vlad pushed him away from Hope just as Brad swung his other arm in a clumsy, powerful arc.

Vlad ducked. The fist passed close enough to stir his hair

and slammed into the side of a display.

The shelf rattled. A box of plastic bats fell open, scattering them across the floor.

Brad barely seemed to notice as he came again, throwing his weight behind every blow. Vlad stepped aside from the first and blocked the second, but the impact jarred his arm. Brad was not fast, exactly, but he was strong enough to make every mistake expensive.

Brad threw himself towards the gun and grabbed it. Vlad tried to twist the gun from his hand but Brad shoved him backward instead, driving him into a rack of old New Year's decorations.

Cardboard toppled around them. A glittering banner reading HAPPY NEW YEAR 2021 slid over Vlad's shoulder and caught briefly on his coat.

"Really?" Vlad muttered, tearing free.

Brad swung again.

Vlad slipped beneath the punch and struck him in the ribs. Brad grunted but stayed upright. He answered with a short, brutal blow that caught Vlad across the shoulder and sent him stumbling into the shelving.

Boxes of Saved By The Bell Valentines came crashing down around him.

Hope had crawled out from behind the decorations.

"Get down, I said!" Vlad yelled.

Brad's head turned toward her and that was the opening Vlad needed. He drove forward, grabbed Brad by the front of his shirt, and slammed him against the wall. For a moment, the larger man's expression showed surprise. Vlad had him pinned, one hand twisted in his collar, the other pressing his arm away from the gun.

Then Brad smiled.

It was a small, ugly smile.

Vlad didn't like how this was going.

Brad let the gun fall and before Vlad could react, Brad's free hand disappeared inside his jacket and came back holding a knife.

Vlad released him and stepped back just as Brad slashed across his chest. The knife tore through the red Santa coat, opening the fabric from lapel to waist. Vlad felt the blade skim him beneath the cloth.

He looked down at the damage, "Seriously?!"

He punched Brad in the stomach and the big man doubled over, but only for a moment. He recovered with a speed that surprised Vlad and drove forward with the knife again.

Vlad caught his wrist and forced the blade away from his body. Brad fought the hold with raw strength, his face reddening as he tried to overpower him.

The knife wavered between them and Vlad tightened his grip.

"Put it down," he insisted.

Brad tore free as the knife dropped, clattered against the floor, sliding beneath a shelf.

For one breath, neither of them moved then Brad kicked Vlad squarely in the chest.

The force pushed Vlad backward into more shelving but before he hit, he noticed a small bag of white powder slip out of Brads pants pocket.

"Well that answers a lot of questions," Vlad said. "I was starting to doubt myself."

Brad grabbed a large metal Christmas star from a nearby display. Its silver points gleamed beneath the fluorescent

lights. He held it in both hands, not like a decoration but like a weapon, and advanced with a grim determination that finally made Vlad stop smiling.

Vlad shifted his stance. The cut in his coat gaped open, and he could feel the cold air against the fabric beneath it.

“Put the festive pointy thing down,” he said.

Brad lunged.

Vlad tried to sidestep, but Brad drove the star forward with both hands and one of its points punched through Vlad’s coat and into his chest.

For an instant, the entire world narrowed to that single point of contact.

Vlad looked down, “Silver plated? Really?”

Brad yanked the star free.

The pain was immediate and vicious. Vlad stumbled, one hand clamping over the wound beneath his torn coat. He had been shot, stabbed, burned, and subjected to centuries of indignities that would have killed a more sensible man. But silver was different. The pain dug deep, sharp enough to steal his breath and make the edges of the room blur. It wouldn't kill him, but it hurt. Badly.

Brad saw it and his expression changed. The uncertainty vanished, replaced by the confidence of a man who had finally found something that worked.

He raised the star again.

Vlad tried to move, but his body was a fraction slower than he needed it to be. Brad brought the metal points down, and Vlad caught his arm just before the star struck him a second time. The impact shuddered through his shoulder. He gritted his teeth, holding Brad’s wrist away from his chest while the big man leaned his weight into the

struggle.

"Stop!" Hope screamed.

Brad glanced toward her.

It was only a glance, but Vlad saw the moment Hope stopped being a witness and became a target in Brad's mind. The man's eyes flicked over her small figure, measuring the distance between them.

Something in Vlad went cold.

He bent Brad's fingers back until he heard the bones crack. The star dropped from his hands and Brad yelled out.

The star hit the floor with a metallic clang. Vlad reached over for one of the 4th of July flagpoles and swung it hard into Brads jaw.

The first blow staggered him.

The second made his knees buckle.

Vlad hit him again, and again, until Brad's arms fell uselessly to his sides and his enormous body slid down the wall. Vlad stood over him for a moment, breathing out of habit rather than need, the small, bent flagpole still clutched in his hand.

Then he let it drop.

Brad lay motionless.

Vlad looked down at the torn coat. His chest burned. The wound was already beginning to close, but not quickly enough to spare him the pain.

"Vlad?"

Hope stood several feet away, staring at him.

He pulled the torn sides of his coat together. "It looks worse than it is."

"You got stabbed."

"Yes."

“Twice.”

“Yes, I was there.”

“With a Christmas star.”

“That was a first.”

She looked at Brad, then at the silver star lying on the floor. Her small face had gone pale, but she was still watching Vlad as if she expected him to explain everything.

“But you’re still alive.”

“Eehhhh….” He said, rocking an open palm back and forth.

“You really are Santa.”

Vlad closed his eyes briefly. “No.”

“You can’t die.”

“Not for lack of trying.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

He looked at her. He could have explained the silver, the wound, the centuries of experience, and the many ways a person could survive things that should have killed them. He could have told her that the man on the floor had come closer than she understood to doing permanent damage. Instead, he looked at the frightened little girl who had crawled out from behind a pile of fireworks decorations because she wanted to find her father.

“Fine,” he said. “I am Santa. But you cannot tell this to anybody. You understand?”

Her face brightened at once. “I knew it.”

“Yes, well, I wouldn’t go charging people to read palms just yet.”

He bent to retrieve the fallen metal star, thought better of it, and left it where it lay. Then he checked the aisle ahead before motioning Hope closer.

The floor below them was still full of criminals, hostages,

and things that were going to become considerably worse before the night was over.

Hope took his hand.

“Are your reindeer on the roof?”

Vlad looked down at her. "Sure.”

“And your sleigh?”

“Why not.”

“What about your elf helpers?”

“They prefer to be called ‘Little People’.”

Hope laughed, a small, relieved sound that seemed wildly out of place among the scattered boxes and broken decorations.

“I thought you were supposed to have white hair.”

“It’s getting there.”

They moved toward the stairs. Vlad kept one hand close to Hope and the other pressed against his chest beneath the coat. The wound was healing, but every step reminded him that the star had been more than an ugly piece of Christmas merchandise.

From below came a muffled voice, followed by another. Then a low mechanical noise rolled through the building, steady and unfamiliar.

Hope’s smile faded.

“Is that my dad?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you going to find him?”

“I feel like it would anti-climactic to stop now.”

At the stairwell, Vlad paused. From the floor below came the sound of someone crying. He could smell fear, sweat, and blood beneath the store’s artificial pine scent. His expression changed, the humor draining from it as he looked

down into the darkness.

“Stay behind me,” he said.

This time Hope didn’t argue.

She nodded, tightened her grip on his hand, and followed him down.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Do You Hear What I Hear?

The main floor looked nothing like the store Vlad had walked into earlier that evening.

The Christmas displays were scattered across the floor, several aisles had been overturned, and merchandise covered the ground.

Decorations hung from broken shelves, their tangled strings of colored lights blinking cheerfully over the mess. A plastic reindeer lay on its side beside a display of artificial trees, while a row of singing snowmen had somehow been knocked onto a table of discounted wrapping paper. One of them continued to sing whenever someone stepped near it, which was unfortunate because the floor had become a minefield of fallen merchandise.

The bright lights that had once made the place look cheerful now cast strange shadows across the walls. Some sections of the store were darker than others and the Christmas music continued to play overhead. A cheerful choir was singing about peace on Earth, completely unaware that the building had become a hostage situation.

Vlad had always found Christmas music irritating, but tonight it was beginning to feel personal.

He descended the final steps with Hope close behind him. His Santa suit was torn in several places, the red fabric stained with blood and dirt. He could feel the silver-star wound in his chest still healing beneath his clothes, although

it was doing so with considerably less enthusiasm than he would have preferred. The only thing keeping him in character were his sunglasses and a five-year-old girl who believed he was Santa Claus.

Six, technically. He was expected to remember that.

At the far end of the store was a small food court. It had probably been designed to give shoppers a place to rest after a long afternoon of buying things they didn't need. There were a few plastic tables, a row of chairs, and several food stalls that had seen better days. One sold pizza, another served Chinese food, and a third appeared to specialize in sandwiches that had probably been sitting under a heat lamp since the previous Christmas.

Several people were sitting on the floor with their hands tied behind them. Shoppers. Employees. Some looked frightened enough to cry, while others watched the criminals with the stiff, silent concentration of people trying to decide whether making eye contact would get them killed. A young employee in a green apron had her knees pulled to her chest. An older man sat beside her, whispering something that might have been a prayer.

There were two criminals watching them. A man wearing a baseball cap stood near the counter, while a woman sat on the edge of a table with a pistol resting across her lap. Both appeared to be keeping an eye on the hostages, although the man seemed more interested in watching the kitchen than the people he was supposed to be guarding.

Vlad looked at Hope, "Stay here."

She nodded, though she was looking past him toward the hostages.

"No, I mean it this time," he added.

"I'll stay."

"Okay. And don't do the thing where you say okay and then follow me. I mean it."

Hope nodded her head.

He started toward the food court, keeping to the edge of the nearest aisle.

Unfortunately, he didn't get far.

A large man wearing a shirt with the name *The Todd* printed across the chest came through a kitchen doorway carrying a full pie plate in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other.

Todd stopped when he saw Vlad.

For a moment, the two men simply looked at each other. Vlad glanced at the pie, then at The Todd, "That should really be a salad."

Todd's expression hardened. He dropped the pie, sending it face-first onto the floor, and swung the knife in one smooth move.

Vlad stepped aside as the blade passed him. Todd's momentum carried him forward, but he recovered quickly and swung again, this time aiming for Vlad's ribs.

Vlad dodged the punch and struck Todd with a kidney punch. Todd doubled over and Vlad shoved him through a pair of raised swinging doors that separated the kitchen and the food court.

A man wearing the baseball cap came running from behind the counter shouting, "Todd!"

Todd stumbled into a stainless-steel worktable, knocking a stack of plastic trays onto the floor yelling, "Randy, help me!"

Randy grabbed a frying pan from the kitchen stove and

charged.

Vlad looked at the frying pan, "Really?"

Randy swung wildly as Vlad easily ducked. The pan struck the wall with a loud metallic clang and before Randy could recover, Todd came at Vlad again with the knife, slashing at his side.

Vlad moved backward, caught Todd's arm, and shoved him into a counter. A container of utensils toppled over, scattering forks and spoons across the floor.

Randy swung the pan again.

Vlad turned just in time to block it with his forearm. He felt the pain from his chest when he twisted away, but still managed to grab the pan.

Randy pulled back hard.

Vlad could hear the hiss of the fryer behind him and the Christmas music playing outside the kitchen. Somewhere in the store, a mechanical Santa was laughing. It was a ridiculous sound to hear in the middle of a fight.

Randy stumbled forward, losing his balance just long enough to make the mistake of punching Vlad directly in the chest, right where the silver star had been.

"Ah!" Vlad yelled, recoiling. "Cheap shot, Randy!"

Vlad's hand instinctively went to his chest, and Randy took advantage of the moment by reaching for the pan, but Vlad recovered first and swung it.

The frying pan struck Randy in the face with a hollow metallic thump.

Randy spun halfway around, his baseball cap flying off. He stumbled backward toward the fryer and tried to catch himself on the counter, but missed, and went down against the edge of the hot appliance.

He screamed as his cap landed in the grease and began to sizzle.

Vlad grabbed the back of Randy's shirt and hauled him away before he could fall completely into the fryer.

Randy kicked and flailed, making an impressive amount of noise for someone who had just lost a fight with a frying pan.

"You are very lucky I made a pinky promise."

Randy stared at him, dazed, and confused. "What?"

Vlad punched him squarely in the face and Randy went backward into a chair, which collapsed beneath him with a crack. He remained there, blinking at the ceiling as though he had only just realized that the evening was not going according to plan.

Vlad dropped the frying pan onto the counter and turned off the fryer, "You're welcome."

Todd was still standing though and came at Vlad again, gripping the kitchen knife so tightly that his knuckles had gone white. He had lost the pie, his partner, and most of the dignity he might have brought into the encounter, but apparently none of this had convinced him to reconsider his career choices.

Vlad sidestepped the first thrust and caught Todd by the shirt, swinging him into a rack of metal utensils.

He dropped the knife, got back up, and stared at Vlad.

Vlad followed his gaze, "Just don't."

Todd lunged anyway.

Vlad caught him around the middle and drove him backward. They crashed into the door of the meat locker hard enough to rattle the handle.

Todd tried to pull away, but Vlad shoved him through the

open doorway and followed just far enough to make sure the man was inside, then slammed the door shut.

Todd began pounding on the other side almost immediately. "Let me out!"

Vlad looked at the door. A small cloud of cold air curled around its edges.

"You should be fine for a few minutes, Frosty."

The pounding grew louder. "Let me out of here!"

Vlad glanced at the refrigeration unit beside the wall. It was a heavy, wheeled appliance used for storing supplies, and it took a little effort to drag it across the floor. He positioned it in front of the meat-locker door, making sure it was firmly in place.

He walked away as the pounding continued, but Vlad ignored it.

There were still hostages to deal with.

He returned to the food court and immediately noticed that the woman was gone.

The empty table where she had been sitting was still there, along with the pistol she had apparently decided not to leave behind.

Vlad scanned the counters and the aisles beyond them, but saw no sign of her. He didn't like it. A missing criminal was rarely an improvement over a present one, particularly when that criminal had a gun.

The hostages stared at him.

Vlad stood in front of them in a Santa suit that was ripped, stabbed, and splattered with blood. His sunglasses were still in place, although one arm had been bent out of shape during the fight.

One woman slowly raised her head.

"Who are you?"

Vlad sighed, "Really? You don't recognize Santa?"

Nobody laughed.

He had not expected them to, but it was still disappointing.

Before he could say anything else, he heard quick footsteps behind him.

"I found him!"

Vlad turned.

Hope came running toward him, her face bright with relief.

He looked at her, "What?"

"My dad!"

She pointed toward the other side of the food court. A man in a security uniform was sitting against the wall, his legs stretched out in front of him. He had a cut above one eye and blood on his shirt. One hand was pressed against his ribs, and his face was pale beneath the fluorescent lights. He looked exhausted, frightened, and very much like someone who had spent the last hour wishing he had chosen a different line of work.

Hope ran to him, "Dad!"

The man lifted his head, "Hope?"

She threw her arms around him.

Henry, her dad, winced as she collided with him, but he wrapped both arms around her and held her close. For several seconds, neither of them said anything. He buried his face against her hair, and Hope clung to him as though she was afraid someone might take him away again if she let go.

Vlad stood a few feet away and watched them. For some reason, he felt uncomfortable.

He had seen thousands of people embrace over the centuries. He had seen families reunited after wars, children returned to parents, and husbands and wives finding each other after years apart. He had watched soldiers come home to children who had grown too tall to remember them properly. He had witnessed people weep with relief in places where the smell of blood never quite left the air.

He understood what he was looking at. He simply had no idea what to do with himself while it was happening.

Standing in the middle of a Christmas store with blood on his jacket and his glowing eyes hidden behind sunglasses, Vlad felt out of place. He was surrounded by people who had just been given back something they thought they had lost, and he had no experience with being the person who gave it to them.

Hope finally pulled away from her father and wiped her face against her sleeve. Henry kept one hand on her shoulder as he looked around the food court, taking in the frightened hostages, the overturned furniture, and the strange man dressed as Santa Claus.

His gaze settled on Vlad. "Who are you?"

"Long story."

Hope looked up at her father, exclaiming "He's Santa."

Henry stared at Vlad.

Vlad gave a small shrug

"I'm Santa."

Henry looked at the torn suit, the blood, and the sunglasses.

"You're a security guard?"

"Yes."

Vlad glanced down at the man's uniform and read the badge.

Henry.

"Good then. Henry. Do you know what's happening here?"

Henry nodded, though his eyes remained on Vlad.

"They're trying to break through the basement wall into the bank next door."

Vlad looked toward the floor, "How?"

"They've been drilling for about an hour and I saw them pack in some dynamite."

"That sounds excessive."

"It is."

Henry glanced toward the hostages and then motioned for Vlad to step around the corner of the food court. Vlad followed him, keeping the basement stairs in sight. Hope stayed beside her father, apparently unwilling to let him out of her reach again.

Henry lowered his voice. "I was in the Army. I know enough about explosives to recognize when someone has brought too much."

"How much?"

"Enough to bring down the wall and the building."

Vlad looked back toward the hostages asking, "Can we get them out?"

Henry shook his head.

"They booby-trapped the front doors and I think the others too. I saw some guy in a Santa suit go back there with some boxes and wires when they first got here."

Vlad turned toward the front doors, which were barely visible beyond the wreckage of the main aisles.

It was one thing to rob a store. It was another to take a group of shoppers and employees hostage while planning to blow a hole into a bank. It was an entirely different matter to

trap the exits and bring enough explosives to potentially bury everyone in the building beneath several floors of concrete.

He had met criminals who were stupid, criminals who were greedy, and criminals who were so convinced of their own intelligence that they could barely recognize a bad idea when it was standing in front of them. These men seemed to have managed all three.

He looked around the food court at the people being held. Some were still frightened and some looked almost relieved because they thought Vlad was some sort of savior.

He felt their eyes on him and he knew that feeling. They had pinned their hopes on the stranger in sunglasses. This unknown man who would save their lives.

They had no idea Vlad Dracul was responsible for the deaths of thousands of people, and that was before he became the stuff of nightmares. They also had no idea he'd shown up without a plan, or that the only reason he was there at all was because of a small, stupid green ring inspired by pop culture.

And they didn't even know about the dynamite yet.

His gaze moved to Hope who was standing beside her father, one small hand wrapped around his. She looked tired, and there was still a trace of fear in her face, but she was no longer alone.

For the first time that night, Vlad felt the familiar weight of a promise.

He had promised her he would find her father.

He had.

But that wasn't enough anymore.

Now there were dozens of people trapped in the building,

and somewhere underneath them were enough explosives to turn Uncle Wang's Emporium and the bank next door into another Diamond parking lot.

He could leave. He had found Hope's father, and the promise he had made to the little girl was technically fulfilled. There were police somewhere outside, and if he could find another way out of the building, he could disappear before anyone had a chance to ask why Santa had been stabbed with a Christmas star.

It would be easy. He had spent centuries making a habit of leaving other people's problems behind him.

Then Hope looked at him. She didn't ask him to stay. She didn't beg him to help the hostages. She simply watched him with the same expression she had worn when he first promised to find her father, trusting him to do what he said he would do.

Vlad looked away but her face was imbedded in his memory now.

It wasn't desperation.

It was trust. Trust that he would do the right thing.

He hated that expression.

It was far more difficult to disappoint someone who believed in you than someone who feared you.

He turned toward the basement stairs.

"You're going down there, aren't you?" Henry asked.

Vlad sighed and nodded.

"Why?"

Vlad looked at Hope again. She was still standing beside her father, her fingers curled around his hand. Somewhere above them, the Christmas music changed to another song, and a choir began singing about a child who had been born

in a manger.

"Because I'm Fu--," he caught himself and looked at Hope. "Because I'm Santa Claus and I need to save Christmas."

He walked back toward the nearest Christmas display, where a long wooden baseball bat with a small red bow, lay beneath a pile of fallen decorations. The words *Spokane Indians* were printed across the handle. It was probably a promotional item from a sporting goods display, and it had apparently survived the evening without being used by anyone who understood how to swing it.

Vlad picked it up, tested its weight, gave it a couple of swings, and nodded to himself. It wasn't a sword, but then again, he wasn't expecting to duel anyone in the basement. He was hoping to find a group of men who had brought enough explosives to demolish a building and convince them that their evening would be improved by surrendering.

If that failed, he had a baseball bat.

It wasn't the most sophisticated plan he had ever come up with, but it was a plan.

He looked once more toward the hostages. Henry had put an arm around Hope and was speaking quietly to her. The other hostages watched Vlad with a mixture of hope and disbelief. One of them even appeared to be considering whether it was appropriate to ask Santa for help.

Vlad decided not to encourage that.

He started toward the basement stairs.

Before he reached the door, Hope yelled out, "Good luck, Santa."

He reached up and put his finger to his nose, then he started down the stairs.

CHAPTER NINE
Here Comes Santa Claus

Vlad reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped into the basement.

The room was much larger than he expected. Exposed pipes ran across the ceiling, disappearing into the darkness beyond the rows of support columns that separated the storage areas. The concrete floor was uneven in places, and the air smelled of dust, old cardboard, and the dampness that seemed to settle into every basement that had been neglected for too long.

Metal shelving lined the walls, stacked with spare parts, broken appliances, and boxes of merchandise that had probably been waiting for someone to do something with them for years.

The sound of voices came from somewhere near the back of the room. He could also hear the faint hum of machinery and smell something sharp and unpleasant beneath the dust. Sulphur, perhaps, mixed with the bitter-almond smell of whatever chemicals the criminals had brought with them.

Vlad stopped on the last step and listened.

He had been in enough basements over the centuries to know that there was rarely times where being in a basement was a good thing. They tended to be dark, damp, and full of things that should have been thrown away. This one had the added disadvantage of containing people with guns and an aggressive amount of explosives.

He adjusted his grip on the baseball bat and gave a small pat on his chest wound, reminding himself that it hadn't fully healed yet.

Vlad had no particular attachment to baseball, but he appreciated that the bat had been made for the express purpose of hitting things. It was a refreshing change from the plastic decorations he had been forced to improvise with upstairs.

He moved slowly around one of the support columns, keeping to the shadows.

Three men were gathered around a small, portable drill positioned near a hole that had been cut through the basement wall. The opening was roughly the size of a small window, with broken concrete scattered across the floor beneath it. Beyond the hole was darkness, although Vlad could make out a few cables and what looked like a section of the neighboring building's foundation.

A woman stood nearby, watching the work with her arms folded. She was the same woman who had been guarding the hostages upstairs. Michelle, if he overheard correctly.

One of the men, who Vlad didn't know, was kneeling beside a collection of wires and explosives. He was working over a metal case, his fingers moving between the cables with the nervous concentration of someone who knew just enough about what he was doing to understand how badly things could go wrong.

Another man stood over him with a gun.

Vlad recognized the leader who was leaning against a wall behind everyone. It was from the way he behaved. He was the one giving orders, and the others seemed to be waiting for his approval before doing anything.

"Must be Pete", Vlad thought. He had heard the name mentioned over the cheap walkie-talkies.

Pete leaned over the man messing with the explosives, "Sean, How much longer?"

Sean looked up briefly. "I told you. I need a few more minutes."

"You've had plenty of minutes."

"And I've had people yelling at me the entire time. It doesn't help."

Pete brought the gun closer to the Sean's head exclaiming, "Then work faster."

Sean returned to the wiring.

Vlad watched them for another moment. He could have rushed forward and started hitting people with the baseball bat, but he had learned over the years that charging blindly into a room full of explosives was generally considered a poor decision. It was one of those rare occasions when patience might actually be useful.

He took a cautious step forward and he was doing well…until a mouse scurried past his foot.

It was a small, ordinary mouse, the sort of creature that had probably lived in the basement long before the criminals arrived. It darted between a stack of boxes and one of the support columns, then ran directly toward the largest man in the room.

The large man saw it first.

And screamed.

It was a surprisingly high-pitched sound for someone of his size, and he immediately grabbed for his gun and at the floor.

The shot exploded through the basement, ricocheting off

the concrete walls and ceiling until the entire room seemed to shake with the noise. Vlad winced and clapped one hand over his ear. The sound continued ringing in his head long after the echo had faded.

Pete moved faster than Vlad expected as he watched him run over, grab the gun and shove Knuckles backwards.

"Knuckles! You idiot! You want to blow us all up?!"

Sean held up both hands, breathing heavily.

"I'm sorry, man! I just... I just hate mice," Knuckles said in a panic.

Pete stared at him, "And I hate morons!"

He turned and handed the confiscated gun to Michelle. "Watch him!"

Michelle took the weapon without comment. She seemed considerably less impressed by her companions than Pete was, which Vlad suspected was because she had been paying attention to what they were actually doing.

Knuckles tried to compose himself. He looked around the basement as though he expected the mouse to return with friends.

Vlad rubbed his ear and waited for the ringing to stop. He was still trying to recover when his elbow caught the edge of a shelf.

A box of steel hangers tipped forward and Vlad turned just in time to see the entire box fall.

The hangers struck the concrete floor in several enormous clangs, scattering in every direction. The sound was almost as loud as the gunshot, and in the confined basement it seemed to go on forever.

Every head in the room turned toward him.

Vlad stood motionless beside the shelf, the baseball bat

hanging loosely in his hand.

For a moment, nobody said anything.

Then Vlad raised his eyebrows, "So, you heard that?"

Michelle brought up her gun and fired.

Vlad moved quickly, and the bullet struck the concrete wall behind him. A small chip of masonry broke away and struck the floor near his boot.

Michelle fired again, but Vlad was already moving behind the support column. The second bullet struck the metal shelving, sending a box of old electrical fittings tumbling to the floor.

Pete shouted something that Vlad couldn't make out over the ringing in his ears.

Knuckles was reaching for another weapon when Vlad leaned around the column and threw the baseball bat. He hadn't planned on throwing it. He had intended to use it, preferably against the head of whoever came nearest, but Knuckles was in the way, and the bat was suddenly the most convenient object available.

It spun through the air, turning end over end until the wooden handle struck Knuckles squarely in the head.

He staggered backward, collided with one of the support columns, and slid to the floor. His eyes closed before he reached the bottom.

The bat bounced away and landed beside a stack of plumbing supplies.

Vlad had been hoping for a slightly more dignified result, but he was prepared to accept success in whatever form it arrived.

Sean, the man kneeling beside the explosives, stopped working long enough to stare at him, "Who are you?"

Vlad stepped out from behind the column and spread his arms, displaying the torn red jacket and the bloodstains that covered the front of his suit, asking, "Are you serious?"

Michelle let out a primal scream and charged.

Vlad had been expecting her to fire again, so the sudden decision to attack him with her bare hands was almost refreshing. It suggested a degree of personal commitment to the situation that he couldn't help but admire.

Almost.

She came at him with her arms raised, apparently intending to knock him down through sheer force of determination. Vlad waited until the last possible moment, then stepped aside.

Michelle sailed past him.

She struck a stack of shelving units with enough force to send the entire structure tipping over. Metal shelves crashed across the floor, boxes spilled open, and a collection of plastic Christmas decorations scattered beneath the falling wreckage.

When she fell to the ground, she didn't move.

Vlad bent down and patted her on the back, "You look hurt. Take tomorrow off. I hear it's a holiday."

He turned toward Pete who was no longer shouting. He was watching Vlad with an expression that had begun as anger but was now mixed with something else.

He had expected a security guard, perhaps a police officer, or maybe another employee who had decided to be brave. He had not expected a man in a bloodied Santa suit who could throw a baseball bat hard enough to knock out Knuckles and move faster than Michelle could aim.

Pete's gaze flicked toward the unconscious men.

Then it returned to Vlad.

"Who are you?" he sincerely asked.

Vlad glanced down at his outfit, "No matter what I say, I guarantee you wouldn't believe me."

Pete reached into a basket of plumbing supplies and pulled out a long metal tube. It was heavy, perhaps part of a pipe assembly, and he held it in both hands as he approached.

Vlad sighed, "Please tell me you're not going to try to hit me with that."

Pete answered by swinging it.

Vlad ducked easily. The metal tube swept over his head and struck a support column with a hollow clang. Pete grunted, turned, and swung again.

Vlad moved aside and prepared to take the weapon away from him but that was when Pete changed direction.

He reversed his grip and swung the other end of the tube into Vlad's chest, striking him directly in the open wound left by the silver star.

Pain shot through Vlad so sharply that his knees nearly gave way.

He grabbed his chest and staggered backward, his breath catching in his throat. The wound had been closing, but the impact had reopened it, and for a moment the entire basement seemed to tilt around him.

Pete saw the effect and smiled.

He swung again.

This time the tube struck Vlad on the top of the head.

Vlad fell hard onto the dirt-streaked concrete, the impact sending another wave of pain through his body. His sunglasses slipped slightly down his nose, and the ceiling

lights blurred above him.

Pete stood over him, holding the metal tube like a trophy. "Looks like Saint Nick ain't gonna be making the rounds tonight."

Vlad lay still for a moment.

He could hear Pete breathing. He could hear the hum of the drill and the soft electrical buzz coming from the equipment beside the explosives. He could also hear the faint ringing in his ears, which had never entirely gone away after Knuckles had fired his gun.

He was beginning to regret coming to the store. Not the part about getting Kevin's ring. That had been a perfectly reasonable errand. It was everything that had happened afterward that he found objectionable.

Vlad planted one hand on the floor and pushed himself upright.

He rolled his shoulders, straightened his sunglasses, and looked at Pete, "You're lucky I made a promise tonight."

Then he stood up and Pete's smile faded.

Vlad advanced. He was still hurting, and he knew it. The wound in his chest burned beneath the torn fabric, and his head throbbed where the pipe had struck him, but Pete had made the mistake of assuming that pain and defeat were the same thing, and Vlad had never been particularly fond of people who made assumptions about him.

Pete swung again, skimming Vlad's face as he dodged, forcing his sunglasses to fly off and skid across the concrete.

He stopped moving and slowly, he looked down at the glasses.

"Do you have any idea how long shipping is for those?"

Pete stared at his amber eyes in disbelief.

"What are you?"

Vlad grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pushed him across the room.

"I'm the King of Shadows in a bright red coat! Happy?!"

Vlad was just about to grab him by the collar when a loud metallic click came from somewhere behind them.

Both men stopped.

The sound was small, almost insignificant beneath the humming machinery, but it had come from the table where Sean was working. Sean had gone completely still. His hands hovered over the wires, and the color had drained from his face.

He looked down saying, "That's not supposed to happen."

Vlad turned toward the explosives.

A small red light had appeared on the device. A second light began blinking beside it, followed by a steady electronic beep.

Pete immediately backed away. "What did you do?" he shouted.

Sean shook his head. "Nothing! The timer must have been damaged in the fight."

Pete stared at him. "Damaged? How do you damage a timer?"

"I don't know! Maybe when the shelves came down!"

Vlad looked at the explosives, then at Sean, "How long?"

Sean swallowed, "Less than a minute."

For a moment, the basement went quiet except for the ticking.

Vlad stared at him, "You just needed to get me the ring."

Behind them, Sean was frantically trying to shut down the timer. He leaned over the equipment, moving wires aside

and pressing buttons that appeared to have been installed for precisely this sort of emergency. None of them seemed to be helping.

The beeping grew faster.

Vlad turned toward the explosives and for the first time that night, there was nothing funny about it.

He knew what an explosion could do to a room full of people, and he knew that the hostages upstairs had no idea how little time they might have left.

He could survive the blast, perhaps. He had survived worse, but that wasn't the problem.

The people upstairs were human. They would not survive a building collapsing around them. Hope would not survive it. Henry would not survive it. And all those frightened shoppers who had been sitting on the floor, waiting for someone to tell them everything would be all right, would never get the chance to go home.

Vlad looked at the timer.

Forty seconds.

Sean was still trying to disconnect the wires, his hands shaking so badly that he could barely hold the cutters.

"Move," Vlad said.

Sean looked up at him, "What?"

"Move!"

Vlad shoved him aside and leaned over the table.

The explosives were packed tightly together, surrounded by wires and a small control unit. He could see the blinking lights and the timer counting down. There were more wires than he cared to examine, and he had no particular desire to become an expert in explosives at this late stage of his evening.

"Which one?" Vlad demanded.

Sean pointed with a trembling finger, "That one!"

Vlad looked at the wire. It was protected by a thick protective layer that Sean couldn't cut through.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes!"

Thirty seconds.

Pete had managed to sit up among the fallen boxes. He looked from Vlad to the explosives, then toward the stairs. For a moment, he seemed to be considering running. Then he looked at the timer again and realized that there was nowhere he could go that would make the situation better.

"Do something!" Pete shouted.

Vlad glared at him. "I am doing something!"

He reached for the wire Sean had indicated.

Sean grabbed his arm.

He had no idea whether Sean was right. He had no idea whether the wire he had been shown was the correct one. He had no idea whether the people who had designed the device had included some clever safeguard to prevent an idiot from accidentally detonating it.

He did know that he had run out of time. Vlad grabbed the wire, lifted it up to his mouth and bit into it, severing it.

The red light disappeared and the ticking stopped.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Vlad remained bent over the table, one hand gripping the wire, waiting for the explosion that did not come. He listened for the faint click of another timer, the crackle of a spark, or any other indication that he had made a mistake.

Nothing happened so slowly he straightened up.

Sean stared at the device as though it had performed a

miracle.

Pete looked from the explosives to Vlad. Knuckles was still unconscious beside the support column, and Michelle remained sprawled among the empty Christmas display boxes. Somewhere in the distance, the store's Christmas music continued playing.

Vlad turned around, still holding the wire, "You're all getting lumps of coal!"

His voice echoed through the basement.

Pete tried to stand, but his legs gave out. He slumped against the boxes, exhausted and in no shape to run. Sean sat back on his heels, breathing hard, his hands still trembling.

He thought about how his dad would be so disappointed in him right now.

Vlad had come to Uncle Wang's Emporium to buy a present for his assistant. He had been shot at, stabbed with a Christmas star, beaten with plumbing equipment, and forced to wear a Santa suit that smelled like a public restroom.

He had also been forced to make a pinky promise to a six-year-old girl, which he suspected was going to prove more complicated than any of the injuries.

And now he had saved a building full of people from being blown to pieces.

It was not how he had planned to spend Christmas Eve.

Sean slowly lifted his head. His eyes moved from the wire in Vlad's hand to the blood on his torn jacket, then finally to Vlad's face.

Sean stared at him. He remembered the amber glow in his eyes.

"You're not going to kill us?"

Vlad looked at him for a long moment. Then he took off his sunglasses and examined the damaged frame. He tried straightening the arm, but it resisted. He put them on anyway, although they sat crookedly on his nose.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Do you know what the time frame is on a 'Pinky Promise'?"

CHAPTER TEN
Have Yourself a Merry Gerald Christmas

A few minutes later, the basement was quiet except for the distant sound of sirens outside.

Vlad stood for a moment beside the table where the explosives had been laid out, looking down at the wire still dangling from his fingers. He had no idea whether Sean had been telling the truth about which wire to cut, and he had decided that this was probably something he would be better off never knowing.

The important thing was that the timer had stopped, the building was still standing, and he had not been forced to be buried under several tons of concrete, again, but that was another story.

He dropped the wire onto the table and looked around at the criminals scattered across the basement.

Pete was sitting against a stack of boxes, nursing his injuries, and looking as though he had just realized that his evening had gone terribly wrong.

Sean remained beside the explosives, staring at the disconnected timer.

Knuckles was still unconscious near the support column, while Michelle had begun to stir among the empty Christmas display boxes.

Vlad considered giving them all a final warning about the

consequences of ruining Christmas.

Instead, he decided that the prospect of spending the next several years in prison would probably accomplish the same thing so he headed for the stairs.

His chest still hurt where Pete had struck him with the metal pipe. His shoulder was stiff, his head throbbed, and the silver-star wound had left his shirt sticking uncomfortably to his skin.

The Santa suit was beyond repair. The red coat hung open and the trousers were dirty. He was beginning to understand why Santa traditionally wore a thick suit. It was probably less about keeping warm and more about hiding the evidence of a difficult evening.

As he climbed the stairs, he could hear the sirens growing louder.

By the time he reached the main floor, the sound of the police outside had become almost deafening.

The store looked even worse than it had before. Broken decorations lay across the floor, merchandise was scattered through the aisles, and several of the displays had collapsed entirely. The cheerful Christmas music was still playing, although one of the speakers had begun making an intermittent crackling sound that gave every song the atmosphere of a haunted house.

Vlad emerged from the stairwell and found the remaining hostages gathered near the front of the store. A few had been given blankets by employees, and one man was holding a paper cup of water with both hands as if he wasn't entirely convinced it was real.

They all turned when Vlad appeared.

He was a difficult figure to miss. His red Santa suit was

torn and stained with blood, his hair was a mess, and his sunglasses sat crookedly across his face. He carried himself with the exhausted irritation of a man who had his nights plans interrupted with nonsense.

He looked around at the hostages, "Is everyone alive?"

A woman slowly raised her hand, "I think so."

"Good enough."

Nobody seemed quite sure how to respond to that.

Vlad looked toward the entrance, where police officers had successfully removed the explosives on the door and were now moving through the wreckage and directing people toward the doors.

Uniformed officers moved through the store, checking the aisles and calling to one another. Beyond the glass, red and blue lights flashed against the snow-covered street.

For once, Vlad was happy to see the police though he had no intention of sticking around long enough to explain why a man dressed as Santa Claus had emerged from a hostage situation looking as though he had fought an entire army.

There were limits to his patience.

Henry was standing near the entrance with Hope. She stayed close to his side, occasionally looking up to make sure he was still there. Henry had an arm around her shoulders, and was considerably more comfortable now that he knew she was safe.

Hope spotted Vlad and yelled, "Santa helped me find you."

Henry looked at Vlad. "Santa, huh?"

Vlad shrugged, "It is a long story."

Henry studied him for a moment, taking in the torn jacket and the blood on his clothes. He looked as though he

wanted to ask several questions but had decided that this was neither the time nor the place.

Outside, the flashing red and blue lights reflected through the windows as police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances surrounded Uncle Wang's.

The snow continued falling, settling over the emergency vehicles and the pavement. The store's sign flickered above the entrance, illuminating the sidewalk in uneven bursts of light.

The hostages were being escorted outside in small groups. Some thanked the officers as they passed, while others simply hurried toward the waiting ambulances and the relatives who had gathered beyond the police cordon.

A few people looked back at the store, apparently trying to make sense of what had happened to their evening.

Henry glanced toward the officers and then back at Vlad. "I have a feeling you're the type of person who doesn't like police attention."

"Not since the sixties, Henry."

"You saved my life."

Vlad shook his head. "I saved your daughter's Christmas. Your life was simply attached to it."

Henry smiled faintly. He looked down at Hope, who was still watching Vlad with complete confidence in his abilities, then motioned for Vlad to step away from her for a moment. Vlad followed him a few feet toward the side of the entrance.

Henry lowered his voice, "Can I ask you something?"

"You can. Whether I answer is an entirely different matter because I've been inundated with them tonight."

Henry glanced toward Hope before looking back at him.

"Seriously. Why did you pretend to be Santa?"

Vlad looked toward the little girl. She was standing a few feet away, holding onto Gerald while walking up an aisle looking for something.

"I didn't exactly plan on it," Vlad said. "I needed to get inside this building so I could ruin my night."

Henry looked at him, "And then Hope thought you were Santa?"

"Yes."

"And you just went along with it?"

Vlad looked at Hope again, "She needed to believe I was."

Henry was quiet for a moment. The sounds of the police and fire crews filled the space between them. Somewhere outside, a siren wound down, and an officer called for someone to bring a medical kit.

"Why?"

Vlad lowered his gaze to the floor. For a moment, he considered giving Henry a simple answer. He could have said that it had been easier to play along than to argue with a child. He could have blamed the situation, the costume, or the fact that he had already been having a terrible evening. But Henry had asked a genuine question, and Vlad found that he didn't particularly want to lie to him.

"When I was about her age, I didn't have Christmas."

Henry waited during Vlad's small pause.

"We used to. Huge family gatherings. Much laughter. There was food, music, and more people in one room than I generally cared to tolerate. My brother and I would spend the days beforehand making plans for everything we wanted to do. We were children. We believed that the world was a much simpler place than it actually was."

He paused again.

"Then my brother and I were taken from our home and given to the Ottoman Empire as political hostages. We were children, Henry. We had no say in it. We didn't get Christmas with our family ever again. We didn't get any of the things children are supposed to have."

He spoke without looking up, his voice quieter than it had been all evening.

The memory was old, older every decorated building around them. He could still remember the cold, the unfamiliar faces, and the realization that the life he had known was over. There had been no grand farewell to his childhood, no chance to return home for one last celebration.

One day he had been a boy who looked forward to Christmas, and then he was somewhere else, learning that the people who held his future in their hands had no interest in what he wanted.

For years afterward, he had tried not to think about the things he had lost.

Eventually, it became easier to hate the holiday than to remember what it had once meant to him.

He looked around at the decorations hanging from the walls. A plastic wreath had fallen beside the entrance, and one of the store's cheerful Christmas signs was hanging crookedly above a damaged display. Beyond the windows, people were walking through the snow beneath the lights strung along the street.

"For a very long time, I hated Christmas because of that. I hated watching people celebrate something I never had. Families together. Children smiling. Feelings of hope.

Believing in a magic specter who watched over them."

Henry smiled slightly, "That sounds about right."

Vlad gave him a small look. "It is one of the more ridiculous things about you blood bags."

Henry chuckled, but he didn't interrupt.

Vlad looked back at Hope, continuing, "But then I saw her. She was frightened and looking for her father, and somehow she still believed that someone was going to come and help her. She had every reason to be scared. She had been left alone in a building full of dangerous people, and she didn't know whether she would ever see you again. Yet she still believed someone would come."

He paused, watching Hope as she carefully turned Gerald's pot in her hands, "I didn't want tonight to take that away from her."

Henry followed his gaze.

Vlad could see the understanding settling across the man's face. He had expected Henry to say something sentimental, perhaps to thank him again or tell him that he was a good person. The possibility made Vlad uncomfortable enough that he briefly considered returning to the basement.

Instead, Henry nodded.

"I suppose I didn't want the spirit of the season to leave her because of all this."

He looked at Vlad, "That was incredibly nice of you."

Vlad immediately looked annoyed. "Please don't say things like that. I have a reputation."

Henry laughed. It was a genuine laugh, and Vlad found himself almost smiling in response before he remembered himself.

He had spent centuries cultivating a particular image. He was dangerous, sarcastic, and generally unpleasant to be around. He did not rescue children because it was nice. He rescued them because he had made a promise, and he honored his promises even when they became inconvenient.

Especially when they became inconvenient.

He was not about to let one small girl and her security-guard father ruin his reputation by suggesting he had a heart.

He had enough problems already.

Hope suddenly came running toward them yelling, "Santa!"

Vlad looked down. "Yes?"

She held out her hands, "You can't forget your helper, Gerald!"

She handed him the cactus.

Vlad took it carefully, looking down at the little plant. During the course of the evening, Gerald had been dragged through the store, carried into several fights, and exposed to an amount of violence that would have left most houseplants traumatized. He had survived without complaint, although that was hardly unusual for Gerald.

Vlad noticed that Hope had put him in a new pot with a big red bow. The pot was clean and unbroken, unlike almost everything else in the store.

The bow had been tied neatly around its rim, and the cactus sat in the middle as though it had been dressed for a Christmas party.

On the bow was a small, white bag.

Vlad stared at it for a moment and then decided to reach in and see what she had added.

It was a Green Lantern ring.

"Where did you get this?"

Hope smiled, "I found it over there in the aisle. There were lots of them."

"Because of course," he said to himself.

Gerald said nothing.

Vlad adjusted the red bow and held the plant against his chest, "Well," he said, "at least somebody had a productive evening."

Hope beamed.

Henry watched them, still smiling. He seemed to understand that Gerald was not merely a cactus to Vlad, although he probably had no idea how the plant had become part of the evening's adventure.

"Is that ring for elf, Kevin?" Hope asked.

"Yes, it is."

Hope looked at the ring. "Does he like superheroes?"

"Unfortunately."

She considered that answer, then looked down at Gerald. "Does Gerald like superheroes?"

"Gerald doesn't like anything. He is a cactus."

Vlad then slipped the ring into his pocket and adjusted his grip on the pot. He looked toward the front entrance, where the police were still moving through the store. An officer was speaking to one of the employees, and another was looking in his direction.

Vlad decided it was time to leave.

The authorities would have questions. They always did. And while he was certain he could come up with several perfectly reasonable explanations, he was equally certain that none of them would be believed.

He started walking toward the side door, away from the lights and crowds.

Hope and Henry followed him, "Are you going to deliver presents?" Hope asked.

"I'm going to have a very stiff drink…and some cookies, to be sure."

"Will you come back next Christmas?"

Vlad stopped.

It was an innocent question, asked without any expectation that he would say yes. She simply wanted to know whether she would see him again, whether the strange man who had appeared in a Santa suit and rescued her father would return when the lights went up and the songs began playing.

Vlad looked at her, "If you are good, you may count on it."

Henry gave Vlad a grateful nod, "Thank you. For everything."

Vlad made a small dismissive gesture. "Yes, well. Try not to get kidnapped again. This was not enjoyable."

Henry laughed.

Hope waved as Vlad continued toward the side door.

Outside, the cold air hit Vlad's face as he stepped onto the sidewalk. The snow had continued falling while they were inside, covering the streets and cars in a thin layer of white.

Police lights flashed against the snow, and the air was filled with the distant sounds of sirens and people talking. The fire trucks stood along the curb, their red bodies bright against the dark street, while paramedics moved between the ambulances and the people who had been brought out of the store.

The city was still filled with Christmas lights.

They hung from streetlamps and stretched across shop windows, shining through the falling snow. A decorated tree stood in the distance, its lights glowing warmly against the winter darkness. Somewhere nearby, a group of people were singing Christmas carols, their voices faint but cheerful.

For the first time that night, Vlad didn't find the lights quite as irritating.

He wasn't sure why.

Perhaps it was because the worst of the evening was behind him. Perhaps it was because he had kept his promise to Hope. Or perhaps it was because, for the first time in a very long while, he had spent Christmas Eve doing something that had nothing to do with his own bitterness.

He didn't care to examine the possibility too closely.

He walked into the alley and headed toward his car, never looking back to see the couple he had saved.

The snow crunched beneath his boots as he was almost at the end of the alley when he stopped.

He could hear Hope's voice behind him, faint but clear enough to recognize.

Then, before he reached the end of the alley, he raised both hands in the air and gave out the loudest, most convincing Santa voice he could manage.

"HO! HO! HO!"

Behind him, Hope looked up at her father, yelling loud enough for Vlad to hear.

"I knew it! I told you!"

Vlad smiled as he rounded the corner.

For once, he didn't mind the sound of Christmas.

Gerald said nothing.

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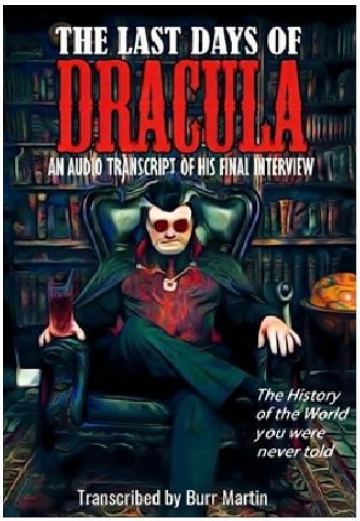

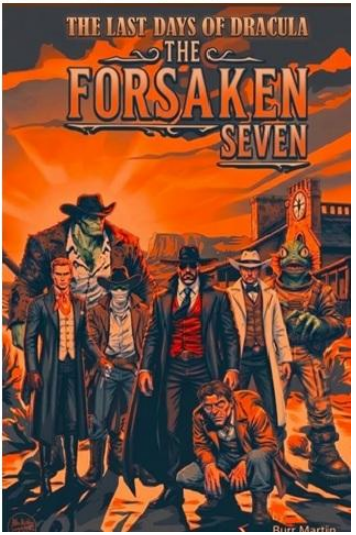

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