

# SCARY DEAD THINGS



**RICK GUALTIERI**

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# **Scary Dead Things**

**The Tome of Bill  
Part 2**

**Rick Gualtieri**

Wayman Publishing



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Scary Dead Things

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For Joey, Connor, and Raiden; the scariest things I know.

Special thanks to Alissa, Sheila, Jennifer, Sandra, Anne, and Marquel. Your encouragement helped make this book possible. I hope that one day I am able to help inspire you to reach for your dreams the way you have all inspired me to reach for mine.

## Introduction

Let's face facts: sequels are scary business. And no, I don't just mean horror sequels. I mean *any* sequel, and for many different reasons. The thing is; they're scary for both the audience and the writer. For the audience, it's always the same: will this live up to the expectations set in the previous chapter? Will I wind up with a *Godfather part 2*, or will I wind up with *Batman and Robin*? Even worse than that last example...and one of the cruelest things that one human can inflict upon another...is the sequel in name only (cue scary music!) because, let's face facts, nobody wants to pay good money to see *Halloween: Season of the Witch* and find out that it has absolutely nothing to do with Michael Myers. As for others, well let's just say that the less said about *Highlander: the Quickening*, the better.

So, too, can sequels be a nightmare for the creators. Can we capture that same magic again? Can we expand upon the world we've created? Can we remember to follow the rules we set? Have those rules written us into a corner? Can we stay true to the characters we've already created? This last one in particular can be difficult because are they truly our characters anymore? From a legal perspective, this one is easy to answer. There's no doubt that Marvel is within their *legal* rights to undo Peter Parker's marriage to Mary Jane with but a single issue; however, that doesn't mean that millions of comic book fans won't storm their offices with pitchforks and torches after they do so. Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin were well within their rights to present to us a Godzilla that didn't breathe fire; however, as a diehard Godzilla fan, I know in my heart that there is a special place in Hell reserved for both of them in doing so.

Thus, therein lies the fear. As a writer, I've breathed life into these characters, loved them, nurtured them, and want to continue to do so; however, there's a fine line because, in some ways, the second they were born they've already outgrown me. The returning characters in this book aren't mine anymore; they're ours. All I can hope is that I've done right by them again.

If not, you can find me sitting out on my backyard deck, patiently awaiting the tarring and feathering that I know will be coming for me someday.

However, until such time as the angry mobs descend to tear me limb from limb, please enjoy these further adventures of Bill Ryder and his friends. I had a hell of a time tagging along with them on this journey. I hope you do, too.

**Rick G.**

## Just Another Brick in the Wall

**\*CRUNCH\*** Yep, no matter what way you put it, being hurled through a wall hurts. It's funny; just a few short months ago I would have argued that the dreaded atomic wedgie was the most common indignity I had suffered throughout my life. That's not such a bad thing, especially when one considers that the proportion of ass-crack related incidents in one's life tends to decrease dramatically post high-school. After all, most people just won't give a wedgie to another grownup. Why? Well, my personal theory is that part of becoming an adult means that we start asking much deeper questions about life than when we were kids, one such question being: do I really want to put my hands where this person's dirty ass has been?

That being said, getting thrown through the air to crash into, and sometimes through, solid objects was becoming a disturbingly common occurrence in my life as of late. Considering the overall painfulness of such experiences, I was beginning to find myself oddly nostalgic about just having my underwear bunched up my ass by some prankster.

Just in case you're taking notes, brick and concrete were easily the least fun barriers I had been smashed into; however, your basic wooden load-bearing wall, which oddly enough was what I found myself plowing into now, wasn't exactly a vacation in the Caribbean either. If this kept up, I might have to consider starting a blog about all the scenic walls in the Tri-State area and what it felt like to be flung through each and every one of them.

Although perhaps right now wasn't exactly an ideal time to think about blogging. I was just starting to pull myself back to my feet when a dark angry form emerged from the shadows. It was Samuel. He was the leader of a coven of vampires from Queens that called themselves the HBC. This was due to their home territory including the Howard Beach area. It was a stupid name, but considering my own group was known as Village Coven, due to being headquartered in fucking SoHo, I was probably in no position to be throwing stones.

Apparently, it was tradition to name covens after their territories. Sure, you wound up with some silly names. I had even heard there was a Scotrun Coven in Pennsylvania, which was bad for them because they would forever more be known in my mind as the *Scrotum Coven*. All things considered, though, it probably beat the alternative. If every coven were given free reign for names, I have little doubt we'd wind up with dopey crap like *The Blood Brotherhood*, *The Midnight Raiders*, or maybe *The Sons of Darkness*. In short, we'd all sound like retarded local chapters of the *Legion of Doom*. Trust me, I speak from experience here. My own coven had a rule not too long ago regarding taking new personal pseudonyms upon joining. As a result, we wound up with stupid shit like people calling themselves Rage Vector, Night Razor, and, of course, Dr. Death. So, all things considered, I could probably live with Village Coven.

Still, worrying about things like coven names is probably best left to times when

you're not in danger of getting your head torn off. This was not such a time. Samuel leapt at me, no doubt going for the kill. Well, OK, maybe that's a bit obvious. After all, you typically don't fling yourself through the air at people you're having a polite conversation with. Fortunately for me, I was far from out of it. I may not be able to dish it out as well as some others, but I can definitely take it. See, I'm a vampire, too (*just in case you haven't figured that out yet*). I also have a lot of aforementioned experience getting tossed around. You build up a tolerance to it after a while. Those two things combined allowed me to recover quickly enough to snatch a busted two-by-four from out of the rubble of the safe house wall I had just plowed through. Before Samuel could fully cover the distance, I swung the beam and connected with a solid \*KAPOW\*. Samuel went flying back into the shadows whence he just came. That gave me a breather, but I didn't have any delusions that it would be nearly enough to finish him.

I had been told that Samuel was nearly two-hundred years old. As we vampires tend to get stronger as we get older, that made him both a lot more powerful as well as much more experienced than me. Neither one was a checkmark in my favor. Under different circumstances, I should have probably been counting my lucky stars that I was still alive. If this had been my first tussle with a vampire way out of my league, I'd probably be busy either begging for my life or kissing my ass goodbye; however, it wasn't.

Don't get me wrong. I'm no Chuck Norris, and this fight was a *long* ways from being in my favor; however, once you've been in one pissing match with a monster who outclasses you in nearly every way and lived (*sorta*) to talk about it, you start to get a little jaded about the whole thing. It's like when I was a little kid. I remember sitting there watching wrestling on the TV and listening to Mean Gene Okerlund talking about how any given wrestler on any given night could potentially become the new champ. It wasn't too different from what I was doing now. No matter how old the vampire, things weren't one-hundred percent settled until one of us was dust. Of course, this logic ignores the fact that wrestling is all bullshit. Unfortunately for me, I didn't have Vince McMahon off behind the scenes scripting a big upset victory. If I wanted to win this, I couldn't count on 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin running out to save my ass with a steel chair.

Fortunately, I still had a few tricks up my sleeve, one of them being I had my wits about me. Samuel might be older, but he had a major weakness that I could exploit. According to the info I had been given about him, Samuel was old enough to have been born a slave in the deep South before the days of the Civil War. He had been owned by an exceptionally cruel master and had spent the first four decades of his life enduring a mix of excruciating labor and relentless beatings. Things like that would fuck up anybody's outlook on life, and Samuel was no exception.

According to the stories, it was actually Samuel's owner that first had a chance encounter with a vampire. He was turned, then shortly afterwards he attacked and turned Samuel. Why? Who knows? Maybe he wanted to hold dominion over his slave forever, or maybe he was just thirsty. Either way, it's safe to say this guy was a dick sandwich and a half. However, he was also stupid. Being a brand new vampire

himself, Samuel's master had no idea what he was doing. I am told that the act of turning brings out the feral nature in some people. Samuel was the perfect poster child for this. Upon awakening as a vampire, he completely snapped. He turned on his former master, who was too new to know how to control Samuel. Then, when he was done, he turned on his now former owner's family. He didn't stop there either. He slaughtered every living thing on his plantation and on the next two plantations over before his rage burned itself out.

Since by that time the Civil War was raging full force, nothing odd was thought of the carnage. After all, when you have an invading army with a scorched-earth policy rampaging about, most people aren't going to look at a few dozen dead bodies and immediately say, "Hey! It must be vampires." Samuel was thus able to escape without much notice. If anyone ever did try to stand in his way, the archives make no mention of it; however, if they did, it's a safe bet as to what happened to them.

If you're thinking that all of this caused Samuel to spend the next century and a half nursing a massive chip on his shoulder, then bingo! Even up to the present day, it was well known in the vampire community that Samuel only accepted minorities into his coven, and even in that he was particular. Don't get me wrong, I might be just a little bit jaded, too, at the whole thing if it had happened to me; however, it also meant that it wouldn't be too hard for me, your quintessential dorky looking white guy, to push his buttons. A two-hundred-year-old vampire in a blood lusted rage was actually easier to fight than a two-hundred-year-old vampire who was thinking rationally and planning his every step. Fortunately for me, pissing people off is one of my specialties.

"Damn, *you people* have hard heads," I said in a condescending manner, placing heavy emphasis on the 'you people' part. I felt like a massive dick saying it, but I'd rather be a living dick than a politically correct corpse.

"What the fuck did you say!?" Samuel growled as he rose and once more began stalking me.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Forgot you don't understand proper English too well," I said, increasing the mocking in my tone. "How's this? Yo, Nigga! You gots yourself one motherfucking hard head!" Oh yeah, I was erasing about a lifetime's worth of good karma on this one. But it worked. Samuel came right at me with little more than an inarticulate snarl. He was pissed big time. If I didn't time this right, I was going to get a front row seat to watching my head shoved up my own ass.

As he charged me, I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my secret weapon. I was glad I had decided to bring it. Considering this was supposed to be a peace conference, I almost hadn't. Thank god for paranoia. As Samuel closed the distance, I kept the fork hidden from his view, waiting for the right time to strike.

Yes, I said *fork*! Not a cross, not a gun, and definitely not the holy hand grenade of Antioch. Trust me on this one. For starters, forget what you know. Crosses by themselves don't do shit against a vampire. If you ever find yourself cornered by vamps and you think you're going to get out of it by holding two popsicle sticks together, you are going to be in for a *major* disappointment. But maybe you'll get lucky and they'll be laughing so hard at your idiocy that you'll be able to slip away

regardless. I wouldn't count on it - but hey, I'm a glass is half full kind of guy.

Anyway, Samuel crossed the distance between us almost faster than I could see. I just barely had enough time to brace myself before he hit me in the side of the head with a wild backhand swing. I went down. I have to admit that under normal circumstances the blow would have probably put me down for the count. But these weren't normal circumstances, and I'm not a normal vampire...if there even *is* such a thing.

I was already juiced up from earlier. At the start of the fight, one of Samuel's goons had come at me first. I had stepped into his punch and sunk my teeth into his arm. I managed to suck down a few mouthfuls of his blood before he could pry me off.

Now this might not seem significant to you, but in addition to movie lore, you also need to ignore the shit on your typical late night vampire erotica in which everyone is usually biting and sucking on everyone else. In reality, when a vampire bites down on another vampire, bad things happen to the biter. The effect is kind of like what you would expect if you were to drive down to Tijuana and drink your fill from the first water fountain you found, only amplified a couple dozen times. Forget fighting; most bloodsuckers wouldn't be strong enough to *stand* for several hours after drinking another vampire's blood. But not me.

I'm what the other vampires call a *Freewill*. Apparently, they're rare...as in it's been at least half a millennium since anyone has seen another one. Personally, I think a good deal of what they say about me is a load of bullshit; however, it does seem to come with some perks. For starters, I'm immune to another vampire's psychic domination, or *compulsion* as they call it (*hence the name Freewill, duh!*). That's one of the things some of the old Dracula movies got right. Older vampires can mentally dominate younger vampires, especially those they create. They can, more or less, force them to do whatever they want. Vampire society typically uses this to keep order within their ranks. But there are plenty of my kind who just use it to fuck around with the younger vampires.

Perhaps even cooler than that power, though, is what happens if I drink another vampire's blood. Instead of puking my guts out and lying there whimpering, I get a boost like Pac-Man on a handful of power pellets. Basically what happens is I somehow temporarily add their strength to my own. How? Fucked if I know. I just know it works and that it's saved my ass on more than one occasion.

I don't know how old the vampire I bit was, but I was easily running at about two-hundred percent of my normal level. Not powerful enough to engage Samuel directly, but strong enough to allow me to take blows that would otherwise turn my head concave. Thus I was able to shake his hit off and jump back to my feet. Maybe I was a little wobblier than I would have preferred (*he hit me pretty damn hard, after all*) but standing was definitely better than lying down and letting him go all ape-shit on me.

As he once more came after me, still blinded by rage, I sidestepped and plunged the fork deep into the middle of his back. Samuel was a big guy with heavily muscled arms. Normally that's a good thing, both for attracting the ladies as well as beating the tar out of flabby shits like me; however, it's a bad thing for being flexible, as in

flexible enough to be able to reach around and pull my meager little weapon out.

The fork itself didn't do much. I mean, I'm sure it stung *a little*. Getting stabbed isn't fun, no matter what the weapon. But using a kitchen utensil against a vampire is a lot like using a penknife against a grizzly bear - unless, that is, it happens to be a *special* kitchen utensil. Fortunately for me, it was. After a second or two, I could smell it. Another few, and I could see it. And I'm definitely sure Samuel *felt* it.

\* \* \*

Two weeks ago, I had been sitting at home, sipping on a liter of refrigerated blood, just minding my own business. I was relaxing on a Monday night following a long day of coding. I work as a video game developer. I did it during my life, and I still do it during my undeath. I like my job and all, but there is a small part of my mind that likes to remind me that I'm vampire. Not only that, but I'm a legendary type of vampire, a legendary type of vampire who is also the head of his own fucking coven...and yet I was still a goddamned wage slave. I had figured that once I took over the Village Coven, it was going to be one big party after another, with maybe an orgy or two in between. But noooo. Sally, my so called *partner*, kept a tight reign on the coven's bank books. I was lucky to score cab fare from her, much less live the life of avaricious abandon I so craved. But we'll get back to her later, as she also had a hand in the present day situation going on with Samuel.

So there I was unwinding when one of my roommates, Tom, came in the door. Both of my roommates, Tom and Ed, are human. Kind of makes us a less attractive but significantly more fucked up version of *Three's Company*. Anyway, Tom had spent the weekend at his parents' home in New Jersey (*also home to his slightly underage hottie of a sister, which has really nothing to do with the present situation. I just like to mention it*) and had then gone straight to his job in Manhattan, from where he was now returning.

"I've got something new we can try!" he excitedly said after he tossed his sports jacket into the closet. I didn't even need to ask what he meant by that. Since being turned into a vampire some six months ago, my roommates had made it their mission in life to chart my powers and weaknesses. It was mostly the weaknesses they seemed to focus on, and thus, in addition to roommates and friends, I had to add *torturers* to the mental description I kept for both of them. Barely a week went by in which they didn't think of some new thing to stab, burn, or crush me with. My pain had become their hobby. Yeah, they both really needed to get laid.

"What now?" I asked in a bored tone, hoping it might dissuade him.

"This!" he replied, pulling an old fork out of his pocket.

"Let me guess, you misunderstood my previous instructions and are now going to go *fork* yourself?"

"Keep trying, Bill. In another century or two, you might grow a sense of humor that's actually funny," he dryly remarked. "This here is not just a fork. It's silverware...you know, as in *silver*."

"So? You guys already tried silver. It didn't do jack-shit."

“Yeah, I know. But forget about that. That shitty little letter opener was just silver plated. I didn't really think it would work anyway.”

“And yet,” I added, putting an edge to my voice, “it didn't stop you from stabbing me with it...repeatedly!”

“Sorry. All in the name of science,” he continued. “But this is different, trust me. This weekend, my mom had some friends over, and she pulled out the good stuff. She inherited it from her grandmother. This is the real deal here. Pure, solid, you-could-melt-it-down-and-shoot-werewolves-with-it silver.”

“So let me get this straight: you stole your Mom's prized silverware?”

“Borrowed is more like it,” he went on. “Besides, I don't see anything wrong with taking a little advance on my inheritance...especially in the name of research.”

“You know there's probably a special room in hell reserved just for you, right?”

“As long as it has air conditioning, then I'm cool with it,” he answered. “Now hold still. This might sting a bit.”

I don't know why I let him. Maybe I was getting used to it after all. Maybe I was just tired from the day's work (*not to mention that vampires and normal work hours don't mesh too well under the best of circumstances*). More than likely, I just knew that he'd get me eventually. Even if I flat out told him “No!” now, he'd probably just wait and then stab me in the neck the second I stopped paying attention. Whatever the insane reason, I held still as he jammed the damn thing into me.

“Well?” he asked, the fork sticking out of the back of my hand and small drops of blood starting to well up around the tines.

“Well, it fucking hurts! Pull it out!”

“Give it a sec.”

“Now...OW!” I yelled as first smoke and then sparks started shooting out of the wounds in my hand.

“Holy shit, it worked! I knew it!” he exclaimed while the skin around the fork wounds started to char and turn black. “Oh, sorry,” he said, suddenly remembering me and finally yanking the accursed cutlery out of my hand.

Goddamn, that was painful! The bleeding and burning were bad enough, but it also felt like there was a small legion of miners under the skin of my hand, hacking away with dull pickaxes. All in all, a dandy load of fun.

\* \* \*

What had happened to me was now happening to Samuel, albeit in a slightly more central location. As much as I had wanted to punch out Tom's lights at the time, I had to grudgingly admit that this one might be a keeper. Further (*reluctant*) testing had shown two other interesting side effects. For starters, silver was safe to the touch for vampires. I was able to hold and even eat with it. Yeah, that eating part took some convincing by Tom, but he's nothing if not persistent. Whatever its effect, it apparently only happened when in contact with vampire blood. Kind of like dropping a

magnesium flare into a pool of water.

Even better, albeit worse for me at the time, was that something in the silver retarded a vampire's enhanced healing. Instead of a few minutes, it took all night for my hand to get back to normal. So even if Samuel managed to pry loose the fork, which was rapidly turning his back into something that resembled a roman candle, it was going to be a while before he was feeling good about it.

Blinded by both rage and pain, Samuel more or less lost it. He screamed inarticulately and began spinning around, attempting to get at the source of his pain. He spun around and around as his back continued to be engulfed in flames. He plowed into and through another wall, but the fork was stuck fast.

This was my chance, and I wasn't about to let it go. I picked up another plank of wood from the rubble, then snapped it in half over my knee, making sure one of the pieces ended in a nice, sharp point. It would make a dandy makeshift stake.

“Form blazing sword, motherfucker!” I shouted as I ran to finish him off. Yeah, I need to work on my one-liners. Apparently, I still have to work on not being a cocky dickhead either. Aflame or not, my dorky catchphrase managed to get Samuel's attention. As I closed in, stake held high, he caught me square on the chin with an uppercut that sent me flying.

## Time for a Recap

It's one thing to be hit. It's quite another to be caught square on the jaw. It's like time stops for a few moments. During those few seconds, there's a disconnect between the mind and the body. The mind can still be semi-rational, even a little detached. "Well, that was certainly a good shot, wasn't it? Perhaps we should respond in kind," your brain might be saying. Unfortunately, the body isn't quite so coherent. While the mind is carrying on a casual discourse, as if discussing last night's ball game, the body is flopping about, trying to find a comfy spot on the floor to land.

Unfortunately for me, I didn't even have that luxury. When a vampire like Samuel catches you dead center, you go flying. The hit was bad enough, but the old adage about falling applied here, too. Nobody dies from the fall itself, but the landing is a bitch. Same principle applies when you're hurtling through the air as if you've just been shot out of a cannon.

I had just enough time for my mind to register all of this when I slammed into what felt like...you guessed it...another wall. The impact was enough to scatter rational thought of the here and now and fling me into a nice, comfy little flashback regarding how I had gotten into this mess to begin with.

\* \* \*

Things had definitely not been all wine and roses since I had taken over the coven from the previous leader, Jeff, AKA Night Razor. I had defeated him in fair combat, or so the story went. In actuality, another vampire, Sally, had been the one to finish him off. Sally was the vampire originally responsible for luring me to my own death and subsequent turning to the *dark side*; however, soon after she had a change of heart and decided to help me out instead. After the fight with Jeff, she had given me credit for the deed and I had taken over his position.

Before you start getting all sappy over this, though, let me point out that Sally isn't exactly the altruistic sort. Everything I've ever seen her do ultimately seems to be for her own benefit. So, too, was my becoming coven leader. She quickly established herself as my partner behind the scenes. *Partner* apparently having the same meaning in her mind as Fidel Castro telling his fellow Cubans that they were all comrades. In her mind, she was definitely first amongst equals.

My troubles from the start were two-fold. Internally, I had to control a bunch of immortal killers in fashion model guise, all of whom were older than me. Originally, I had some delusions of trying to run a bloodless coven. Vampire or not, I'm not too big on treating normal people like they were snacks in a vending machine. Sadly, most of my undead brethren, Sally included, were not of the same mindset. I was instead forced to attempt to keep the killing contained as well as I could, which meant getting creative; however, even my best efforts couldn't contain all of the bloodlust, which was now partially the reason why I found myself in the middle of a vampire turf war.

The second part of my troubles was the HBC. They claimed Queens as their

territory, and normally there wouldn't have been an issue between our two covens; however, within a few short weeks of being turned, I found myself number one on their to-kill list. See, vampires have laws, too, just like everyone else. Don't get me wrong, I'm pretty sure there's no vampire statute against jaywalking, but there are rules set in place to keep our existence hidden from the general populace. The ruling counsel of vampires, known by their asinine nickname as the Draculas, hands these dictates down to the masses, and the rest of us are expected to follow them. In the vampire rulebook, there's no such thing as a misdemeanor. You fuck up, and you get made an example of. The HBC fucked up, and somehow I got caught up in it all.

The rumor mill had said that Samuel was recruiting new vampires in numbers above the quotas set for regional covens. The vampire in charge of *correcting* their oversight, James, had decided to disguise the culling and give me credit for it in some misguided attempt to increase my reputation as the Freewill of vampire lore. Unfortunately, before he could do damage control and keep things from landing squarely on my head, he was called away on business. From there, things quickly deteriorated.

The HBC vampires thought I was the one responsible for killing their members. Combined with my ascension as the new head of Village Coven, it had caused bad blood to build up quickly between us. Over the next couple months, skirmishes broke out between our two groups. On the one side were vampires who hated me for a crime I didn't commit, on the other were vampires who were eager to find an outlet for some of the violence I had been trying to curb. All in all, it was an explosive situation.

However, if they were the gunpowder, then the fuse was named Sally. Since my dealings with the coven were mostly limited to the weekends (*due to that little job thing I mentioned earlier*), Sally was left in charge during the week. I had originally assumed this was for the best, as she was older than I and far better versed in vampire politics. We all know what happens when you assume; however, when you assume with regards to Sally, you can double that 'make an ass out of me' part of the deal.

It was she who had proposed the mediation between our two covens. A contingent of Village Coven vampires led by us would meet with a delegation of HBC vampires led by Samuel to hash out a truce. The meeting place was set at a neutral vampire safe house close to the Brooklyn Naval Yard, which at the very least meant it was an easy commute for me.

Unbeknownst to me, however (*at least up until a few minutes ago*), was that Sally had purposely staffed our contingent with some of the more violent members amongst our group. They were just looking for an excuse to do some damage. Combine that with Samuel's group, who were likewise spoiling for a fight, and the talks lasted all of three minutes before the first punch was thrown.

A few moments later, at least three vampires were nothing more than ashes. By my count, two of them were from my side of things. After that, complete chaos descended. I quickly lost track of Sally, and after a few minutes of fighting off random Howard Beach vamps, Samuel caught sight of me.

***"THIS FUCKER'S MINE!!"*** was the only compulsion he needed to send out to his

group for them to all back off and seek their mayhem elsewhere. Amusingly enough, if I were somewhat older, I probably would have sent out an opposite compulsion to my group to save my ass, no matter what. But I'm not, and since the vamps that Sally invited from our side weren't my biggest supporters to begin with, they all had no problems letting the two head honchos battle it out *mano y mano*. Thus began our dance, which so far had consisted of Samuel bouncing me off various hard surfaces, broken up by the occasional, much less impressive return shot from me.

\* \* \*

Oh yeah, speaking of hard surfaces, I managed to shake off the impact I had just taken and clear my thoughts. I must have only been dazed for a moment or two because I happily noticed my head was still attached to the rest of my body. I looked up just in time to see Samuel's still blazing form leap across the room towards my prone self.

Just for the record, things like that may work in the movies and may even still look cool in real life, but from a practical standpoint they're kind of dumb to try. I mean, I'm not exactly a Navy Seal, and even I know that while in mid-air not only are you obviously telegraphing where you're headed, but it's a bit hard to change tactics in case your intended target decides to take counter measures.

And I was certainly going to be using said counter measures, especially since I wasn't entirely endeared with the concept of being crushed beneath two-hundred and seventy pounds of burning vampire love. I managed to pull up my knees and get my legs underneath him as he landed on me. I kicked out and sent him back in the direction he had come from. He may not have flown as far as I had from his hit, but fly he did.

This was it. No more bullshit. No more one-liners (*sadly*). I needed to end this now if I wanted to have any chance of living to brag about it. Besides, I could always make up some cool shit I said after the fact. I mean it's not like someone was videotaping this...hopefully.

I grabbed another beam from the rubble and started towards where Samuel had fallen. Amazingly, he was getting up again. He wasn't looking too good, what with being poisoned by silver and on fire, but he still got back to his feet. I just hoped he was out of it enough for us not to repeat ourselves. I wasn't sure I could take another hit like that without my head popping clean off.

We stared at each other across about ten feet of space. He staggered but managed to stay upright. He balled his fists defensively, and I raised my stake in return. A heartbeat passed, or it would have if either of us still had one. We locked eyes and prepared for the final charge. I couldn't help but think there should have been some Ennio Morricone music playing in the background, like in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, but sadly there's never a soundtrack when you need one.

I made my move first. I launched myself at him, and he...exploded in a cloud of flame and dust?? What the fuck? I hadn't even touched him yet. The least he could have done was wait until *after* I staked him to do that.

I was just beginning to wonder what had happened when the smoke from his explosion thinned out, and it all became crystal clear to me. Standing directly behind where Samuel had been just a moment before was Sally, her own broken two-by-four still in hand.

“What the hell!?” was all I could stammer.

“Typically, this is the point where you would say *thank you*,” she replied, smug grin etched onto her pretty face.

“I had him!” I insisted.

“Oh? Like you *had him* right before he punted your ass for a field goal?”

“You saw that?”

“Oh, I did better than that,” she answered. She pulled a *Flip* camcorder from her pocket and waved it at me. Bitch!

“And you didn't help *why??*”

“I was curious to see if you'd get back up,” she answered with an even voice. “Just for the record, I was actually impressed that you did.”

“I'm flattered, I'm sure,” I said dryly.

“Oh, don't be such a grouch. I'll give you full credit...*again*. Of course, we'll both know the truth,” she said with another little shake of her camera. “By the way, is it me, or is this starting to become a habit between us?”

“I didn't need your help this time!” I pointed out.

“Oh, really?” she countered. She bent and started rooting through Samuel's ashes. “Then why was I the one who finished him off?”

“That was a cheap shot!”

“Exactly!” she replied, picking a few things out of the ashes. “Thus proving my tactical brilliance compared to you both.” She finished by tossing my roommate's purloined silverware piece back to me. “Nice fork, by the way.”

## Not Exactly a UN Summit

“All in all, that went almost exactly as planned,” Sally cheerfully explained as we walked back to the main meeting room where the altercation had begun. The sounds of battle could still be heard in the building, but it sounded like things were winding down.

“Whose plan, exactly?” I asked. “My plan was to come here, hash out a truce with Samuel, and then go home. Last I checked, *my* plan didn't include spending the last hour trying to keep him from rearranging my face.”

She shook her head and replied, “Sorry to break it to you, but there's no way your little cease fire would have worked.”

“It might have if you hadn't decided to bring every psycho in the coven along.”

“Like I said, all according to plan,” she pointed out with a tone one might use on a particularly dimwitted child. “We killed two birds with one stone here. With Samuel gone, the rest of his gang won't want to be within ten miles of us. As for our own side of things, I'm pretty sure we managed to purge some of the less pleasant elements of our own group. That's what we like to call a win-win.”

She had a point...maybe, at least minus the excessive mass murder part of it. Still, I was pretty pissed off, and rightfully so.

“You could have told me!” I growled as we entered the now deserted meeting room.

“You wouldn't have gone along with it.”

“Exactly!”

“Hence why I didn't tell you. Duh!” she said, rolling her eyes at me. You know, sometimes I wish I was just a little more evil. If so, I'd have been almost tempted to make sure there was one more casualty to add to the day.

\* \* \*

We straightened up the room a little bit while Sally coached me on what to say. Once we had gotten the table and chairs set up again, she said, “OK, you can call them all back now.”

“How? This whole building is a battle zone. There's no way they'll hear me.”

“Send it out as a compulsion,” she replied.

“And that will do *what*, exactly? I can't control any of these vampires. They're all older than me, or have your forgotten?”

“God, you are dense sometimes!” she sighed. “This has nothing to do with controlling them. If you send it out as a compulsion, every vamp in the building will hear you.”

“Oh. OK, then,” I replied. Yeah, I guess that made sense. Every compulsion I had ever heard (*for lack of a better term*) had been up close. But since there was a psychic

element to it, I guess that meant it could carry further than the sound of the voice making it.

“Alright, so do it then,” Sally prodded me.

I went to open my mouth, then hesitated. After a couple seconds of Sally staring quizzically at me, I smiled sheepishly back at her.

As expected, her response was another eye roll. “Don't tell me you don't know how to compel!? You were supposed to be practicing these things!” she chided.

“I know,” I stammered. “But since I haven't met any vampires I could potentially control yet...I kind of figured...what was the point?”

“And yet somehow you're still alive while a two-century old master vampire is now a pile of dust. You must have a small regiment of guardian angels looking out for you,” she sniffed.

“No shit. I need at least half of them to protect me from you.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” she responded. “Oh well, if you want something done...**THIS BATTLE IS OVER. SAMUEL HAS FALLEN!!**”

It wasn't the loudest compulsion I had ever heard (*or felt*), but it was apparently loud enough. The faint sounds of vampires beating the snot out of each other stopped almost immediately. As we had planned, I positioned myself at the head of the table, with Sally standing behind me as my subordinate. I put an expression of calm determination onto my face as best as I could, which was saying something since turning my back on Sally was about the furthest thing I could think of to give myself a state of calm.

One by one, the various combatants began to filter back into the former meeting room. As also discussed, I said nothing. I merely gestured to the seats as each vampire arrived, waiting for the last of the survivors. It supposedly projected an aura of smug superiority regarding my victory, not to mention it also kept me from having to repeat myself over and over again. That was a good thing, as it lessened the chances of me saying something stupid that would just start the battle up all over again.

When a few minutes had passed since the last vampire returned, I took stock of the survivors. There was no mistaking which way the tide of battle had been turning. No matter the bloodlust some of my coven members might have been feeling, there were conspicuously less survivors on my side of things than on Samuel's. That shouldn't have surprised anyone. Jeff, the former master of Village Coven, tended to pick new members based on their looks and overall frat boy mentality. Samuel's group, on the other hand, looked more like they had been recruited based on how many faces they had smashed in during their mortal life. If further *negotiations* went badly, it would be in our best interest to get the fuck out of Dodge as quickly as possible.

However, that possibility was still a major *if*. If I played my part well enough, there might be no need for that. Yeah, I know...another *if*.

As the last of the survivors took their seats, I reached into my pocket and pulled out what Sally had dug from Samuel's ashes. I tossed his fangs out onto the table as one