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# ROBIN MCKINLEY



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### *Sunshine*

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“Well-written and exciting.” –*Rocky Mountain News*

# Sunshine

Robin McKinley



*To Peter,  
my Mel and my Con wrapped up in one (slightly untidy) package.  
Hey, am I lucky or what?*

## PART ONE

IT WAS A dumb thing to do but it wasn't that dumb. There hadn't been any trouble out at the lake in years. And it was so exquisitely far from the rest of my life.

Monday evening is our movie evening because we are celebrating having lived through another week. Sunday night we lock up at eleven or midnight and crawl home to die, and Monday (barring a few national holidays) is our day off. Ruby comes in on Mondays with her warrior cohort and attacks the coffeehouse with an assortment of high-tech blasting gear that would whack Godzilla into submission: those single-track military minds never think to ask their cleaning staff for help in giant lethal marauding creature matters. Thanks to Ruby, Charlie's Coffeehouse is probably the only place in Old Town where you are safe from the local cockroaches, which are approximately the size of chipmunks. You can hear them *clicking* when they canter across the cobblestones outside.

We'd begun the tradition of Monday evening movies seven years ago when I started slouching out of bed at four A.M. to get the bread going. Our first customers arrive at six-thirty and they want our Cinnamon Rolls as Big as Your Head and I am the one who makes them. I put the dough on to rise overnight and it is huge and puffy and waiting when I get there at four-thirty. By the time Charlie arrives at six to brew coffee and open the till (and, most of the year, start dragging the outdoor tables down the alley and out to the front), you can smell them baking. One of Ruby's lesser minions arrives at about five for the daily sweep- and mop-up. Except on Tuesdays, when the coffeehouse is gleaming and I am giving myself tendonitis trying to persuade stiff, surly, thirty-hour-refrigerated dough that it's time to loosen up.

Charlie is one of the big good guys in my universe. He gave me enough of a raise when I finished school (high school diploma by the skin of my teeth and the intercession of my subversive English teacher) and began working for him full time that I could afford my own place, and, even more important, he talked Mom into letting me have it.

But getting up at four A.M. six days a week does put a cramp on your social life (although as Mom pointed out every time she was in a bad mood, if I still lived at home I could get up at four-twenty). At first Monday evening was just us, Mom and Charlie and Billy and Kenny and me, and sometimes one or two of the stalwarts from the coffeehouse. But over the years Monday evenings had evolved, and now it was pretty much any of the coffeehouse staff who wanted to turn up, plus a few of the customers who had become friends. (As Billy and Kenny got older the standard of movies improved too. The first Monday evening that featured a movie that *wasn't* rated "suitable for all ages" we opened a bottle of champagne.)

Charlie, who doesn't know how to sit still and likes do-it-yourselfing at home on his days off, had gradually knocked most of the walls down on the ground floor, so the increasing mob could mill around comfortably. But that was just it—my entire life

existed in relation to the coffeehouse. My only friends were staff and regulars. I started seeing Mel because he was single and not bad-looking and the weekday assistant cook at the coffeehouse, with that interesting bad-boy aura from driving a motorcycle and having a few too many tattoos, and no known serious drawbacks. (Baz had been single and not bad-looking too, but there'd always been something a little off about him, which resolved itself when Charlie found him with his hand in the till.) I was happy in the bakery. I just sometimes felt when I got out of it I would like to get a little *farther* out.

Mom had been in one of her bad moods that particular week, sharp and short with everyone but the customers, not that she saw them much any more, she was in the office doing the paperwork and giving hell to any of our suppliers who didn't behave. I'd been having car trouble and was complaining about the garage bill to anyone who'd listen. No doubt Mom heard the story more than once, but then I heard her weekly stories about her hairdresser more than once too (she and Mary and Liz all used Lina, I think so they could get together after and discuss her love life, which was pretty fascinating). But Sunday evening she overheard me telling Kyoko, who had been out sick and was catching up after five days away, and Mom lost it. She shouted that if I lived at home I wouldn't need a car at all, and she was worried about me because I looked tired all the time, and when was I going to stop dreaming my life away and marry Mel and have some kids? Supposing that Mel and I wanted to get married, which hadn't been discussed. I wondered how Mom would take the appearance at the wedding of the remnants of Mel's old motorcycle gang—which is to say the ones that were still alive—with their hair and their Rocs and Griffins (even Mel still had an old Griffin for special occasions, although it *hemorrhaged* oil) and their attitude problems. They never showed up in force at the coffeehouse, but she'd notice them at the kind of wedding she'd expect me to have.

The obvious answer to the question of children was, who was going to look after the baby while I got up at four A.M. to make cinnamon rolls? Mel worked as appalling hours as I did, especially since he'd been promoted to head cook when Charlie had been forced—by a mutiny of all hands—to accept that he could either delegate something or drop dead of exhaustion. So househusbandry wasn't the answer. But in fact I knew my family would have got round this. When one of our waitresses got pregnant and the boyfriend left town and her own family threw her out, Mom and Charlie took her in and we all babysat in shifts, in and out of the coffeehouse. (We'd only just got rid of Mom's sister Evie and her four kids, who'd stayed for almost two years, and one mom and one baby seemed like pie in the sky in comparison. Especially after Evie, who is professionally helpless.) Barry was in second grade now, and Emmy was married to Henry. Henry was one of our regulars, and Emmy still waitressed for us. The coffeehouse is like that.

I *liked* living alone. I liked the *silence*—and nothing moving but me. I lived upstairs in a big old ex-farmhouse at the edge of a federal park, with my landlady on the ground floor. When I'd gone round to look at the place the old lady—very tall, very straight, and a level stare that went right through you—had looked at me and said she didn't like renting to Young People (she said this like you might say Dog Vomit) because they kept bad hours and made noise. I liked her immediately. I explained humbly that indeed I did keep bad hours because I had to get up at four A.M. to make

cinnamon rolls for Charlie's Coffeehouse, whereupon she stopped scowling magisterially and invited me in.

It had taken three months after graduation for Mom to begin to consider my moving out, and that was with Charlie working on her. I was still reading the apartments-for-rent ads in the paper surreptitiously and making the phone calls when Mom was out of earshot. Most of them in my price range were dire. This apartment, up on the third floor at the barn end of the long rambling house, was perfect, and the old lady must have seen I meant it when I said so. I could feel my face light up when she opened the door at the top of the second flight of stairs, and the sunshine seemed to pour in from every direction. The living room balcony, cut down from the old hayloft platform but now overlooking the garden, still has no curtains.

By the time we signed the lease my future landlady and I were on our way to becoming fast friends, if you can be fast friends with someone who merely by the way she carries herself makes you feel like a troll. Maybe I was just curious: there was so obviously some mystery about her; even her name was odd. I wrote the check to *Miss Yolande*. No Smith or Jones or Fitzalan-Howard or anything. Just Miss Yolande. But she was always pleasant to me, and she wasn't wholly without human weakness: I brought her stuff from the coffeehouse and she ate it. I have that dominant feed-people gene that I think you have to have to survive in the small-restaurant business. You sure aren't doing it for the money or the hours. At first it was now and then—I didn't want her to notice I was trying to feed her up—but she was always so pleased it got to be a regular thing. Whereupon she lowered the rent—which I have to admit was a godsend, since by then I'd found out what running a car was going to cost—and told me to lose the "Miss."

Yolande had said soon after I moved in that I was welcome in the garden any time I liked too, it was just her and me (and the peanut-butter-baited electric deer fence), and occasionally her niece and the niece's three little girls. The little girls and I got along because they were good eaters and they thought it was the most exciting thing in the world to come in to the coffeehouse and be *allowed behind the counter*. Well, I could remember what that felt like, when Mom was first working for Charlie. But that's the coffeehouse in action again: it tends to sweep out and engulf people. I think only Yolande has ever held out against this irresistible force, but then I do bring her white bakery bags almost every day.

Usually I could let Mom's temper roll off me. But there'd been too much of it lately. Coffeehouse disasters are often hardest on Mom, because she does the money and the admin, and for example actually follows up people's references when they apply for jobs, which Charlie never bothers with, but she isn't one for bearing trials quietly. That spring there'd been expensive repairs when it turned out the roof had been leaking for months and a whole corner of the ceiling in the main kitchen fell down one afternoon, one of our baking-goods suppliers went bust and we hadn't found another one we liked as well, and two of our wait staff and another one of the kitchen staff quit without warning. Plus Kenny had entered high school the previous autumn and he was goofing off and getting high instead of studying. He wasn't goofing off and getting high any more than I had done, but he had no gift for keeping a low profile. He was also very bright—both my half brothers were—and Mom and Charlie had high hopes for them. I'd always suspected that Charlie had pulled me off waitressing, which had

bored me silly, and given me a real function in the kitchen to straighten me out. I had been only sixteen, so I was young for it, but he'd been letting me help him from time to time out back so he knew I could do it, the question was whether I would. Sudden scary responsibility had worked with me. But Kenny wasn't going to get a law degree by learning to make cinnamon rolls, and he didn't *need* to feed people the way Charlie or I did either.

Anyway Kenny hadn't come home till dawn that Sunday morning—his curfew was midnight on Saturday nights—and there had been hell to pay. There had been hell to pay all that day for all of us, and I went home that night smarting and cranky and my one night a week of twelve hours' sleep hadn't worked its usual rehabilitation. I took my tea and toast and *Immortal Death* (a favorite comfort book since under-the-covers-with-flashlight reading at the age of eleven or twelve) back to bed when I finally woke up at nearly noon, and even that really spartan scene when the heroine escapes the Dark Other who's been pursuing her for three hundred pages by calling on her demon heritage (finally) and turning herself into a waterfall didn't cheer me up. I spent most of the afternoon housecleaning, which is my other standard answer to a bad mood, and that didn't work either. Maybe I was worried about Kenny too. I'd been lucky during my brief tear-away spell; he might not be. Also I take the quality of my flour very seriously, and I didn't think much of our latest trial baking-supply company.

When I arrived at Charlie and Mom's house that evening for Monday movies the tension was so thick it was like walking into a blanket. Charlie was popping corn and trying to pretend everything was fine. Kenny was sulking, which probably meant he was still hung over, because Kenny didn't sulk, and Billy was being hyper to make up for it, which of course didn't. Mary and Danny and Liz and Mel were there, and Consuela, Mom's latest assistant, who was beginning to look like the best piece of luck we'd had all year, and about half a dozen of our local regulars. Emmy and Barry were there too, as they often were when Henry was away, and Mel was playing with Barry, which gave Mom a chance to roll her eyes at me and glare, which I knew meant "see how good he is with children—it's time he had some of his own." Yes. And in another fourteen years this hypothetical kid would be starting high school and learning better, more advanced, adolescent ways of how to screw up and make grown-ups crazy.

I loved every one of these people. And I couldn't take another minute of their company. Popcorn and a movie would make us all feel better, and it was a working day tomorrow, and you have only so much brain left over to worry with if you run a family restaurant. The Kenny crisis would go away like every other crisis had always gone away, worn down and eventually buried by an accumulation of order slips, till receipts, and shared stories of the amazing things the public gets up to.

But the thought of sitting for two hours—even with Mel's arm around me—and a bottomless supply of excellent popcorn (Charlie couldn't stop feeding people just because it was his day off) wasn't enough on that particular Monday. So I said I'd had a headache all day (which was true) and on second thought I would go home to bed, and I was sorry. I was out the door again not five minutes after I'd gone in.

Mel followed me. One of the things we'd had almost from the beginning was an ability *not* to talk about everything. These people who want to talk about their *feelings* all the time, and want you to talk about yours, make me *nuts*. Besides, Mel knows my

mother. There's nothing to discuss. If my mom is the lightning bolt, I'm the tallest tree on the plain. That's the way it is.

There are two very distinct sides to Mel. There's the wild-boy side, the motorcycle tough. He's cleaned up his act, but it's still there. And then there's this strange vast serenity that seems to come from the fact that he doesn't feel he has to prove anything. The blend of anarchic thug and tranquil self-possession makes him curiously restful to be around, like walking proof that oil and water can mix. It's also great on those days that everyone else in the coffeehouse is screaming.

It was Monday, so he smelled of gasoline and paint rather than garlic and onions. He was absentmindedly rubbing the oak tree tattoo on his shoulder. He was a tattoo-rubber when he was thinking about something else, which meant that whatever he was cooking or working on could get pretty liberally dispersed about his person on ruminative days.

"She'll sheer, day or so," he said. "I was thinking, maybe I'll talk to Kenny."

"Do it," I said. "It would be nice if he lived long enough to find out he doesn't want to be a lawyer." Kenny wanted to get into Other law, which is the dancing-on-the-edge-of-the-muttering-volcano branch of law, but a lawyer is still a lawyer.

Mel grunted. He probably had more reason than me to believe that lawyers are large botulism bacteria in three-piece suits.

"Enjoy the movie," I said.

"I know the real reason you're blowing, sweetheart," Mel said.

"Billy's turn to rent the movie," I said. "And I hate westerns."

Mel laughed, kissed me, and went back indoors, closing the door gently behind him.

I stood restlessly on the sidewalk. I might have tried the library's new-novels shelf, a dependable recourse in times of trouble, but Monday evening was early closing. Alternatively I could go for a walk. I didn't feel like reading; I didn't feel like looking at other people's imaginary lives in flat black and white from out here in my only too unimaginary life. It was getting a little late for solitary walking, even around Old Town, and besides, I didn't want a walk either. I just didn't know what I did want.

I wandered down the block and climbed into my fresh-from-the-mechanics car and turned the key. I listened to the nice healthy purr of the engine and out of nowhere decided it might be fun to go for a drive. I wasn't a going for a drive sort of person usually. But I thought of the lake.

When my mother had still been married to my father we'd had a summer cabin out there, along with hundreds of other people. After my parents split up I used to take the bus out there occasionally to see my gran. I didn't know where my gran lived—it wasn't at the cabin—but I would get a note or a phone call now and then suggesting that she hadn't seen me for a while, and we could meet at the lake. My mother, who would have loved to forbid these visits—when Mom goes off someone, she goes off comprehensively, and when she went off my dad she went off his entire family, excepting me, whom she equally passionately demanded to keep—didn't, but the result of her not-very-successfully restrained unease and disapproval made those trips out to the lake more of an adventure than they might otherwise have been, at least in the beginning. In the beginning I had kept hoping that my gran would do something really *dramatic*, which I was sure she was capable of, but she never did. It wasn't till after I'd stopped hoping ... but that was later, and not at all what I had had in mind.

And then when I was ten she disappeared.

When I was ten the Voodoo Wars started. They were of course nothing about voodoo, but they were about a lot of bad stuff, and some of the worst of them in our area happened around the lake. A lot of the cabins got burned down or leveled one way or another, and there were a few places around the lake where you still didn't go if you didn't want to have bad dreams or worse for months afterward. Mostly because of those bad spots (although also because there simply weren't as many people to have vacation homes anywhere any more) after the Wars were over and most of the mess cleared up, the lake never really caught on again. The wilderness was taking over—which was a good thing because it meant that it *could*. There were a lot of places now where nothing was ever going to grow again.

It was pretty funny really, the only people who ever went out there regularly were the Supergreens, to see how the wilderness was getting on, and if as the urban populations of things like raccoons and foxes and rabbits and deer moved back out of town again, they started to look and behave like raccoons and foxes and rabbits and deer had used to look and behave. Supergreens also counted things like osprey and pine marten and some weird marsh grass that was another endangered species although not so interesting to look at, none of which seemed to care about bad human magic, or maybe the bad spots didn't give ospreys and pine martens and marsh grass bad dreams. I went out there occasionally with Mel—we saw ospreys pretty often and pine martens once or twice, but all marsh grass looks like all other marsh grass to me—but I hadn't been there after dark since I was a kid.

The road that went to what had been my parents' cabin was passable, if only just. I got out there and went and sat on the porch and looked at the lake. My parents' cabin was the only one still standing in this area, possibly because it had belonged to my father, whose name meant something even during the Voodoo Wars. There was a bad spot off to the east, but it was far enough away not to trouble me, though I could feel it was there.

I sat on the sagging porch, swinging my legs and feeling the troubles of the day draining out of me like water. The lake was beautiful: almost flat calm, the gentlest lapping against the shore, and silver with moonlight. I'd had many good times here: first with my parents, when they were still happy together, and later on with my gran. As I sat there I began to feel that if I sat there long enough I could get to the bottom of what was making me so cranky lately, find out if it was anything worse than poor-quality flour and a somewhat errant little brother.

I never heard them coming. Of course you don't, when they're vampires.

I HAD KIND of a lot of theoretical knowledge about the Others, from reading what I could pull off the globenet about them—fabulously, I have to say, embellished by my addiction to novels like *Immortal Death* and *Blood Chalice*—but I didn't have much practical 'fo. After the Voodoo Wars, New Arcadia went from being a parochial backwater to number eight on the national top ten of cities to live in, simply because most of it was still standing. Our new rank brought its own problems. One of these was an increased sucker population. We were still pretty clean. But no place on this planet is truly free of Others, including those Darkest Others, vampires.

It is technically illegal to be a vampire. Every now and then some poor stupid or unlucky person gets made a sucker as part of some kind of warning or revenge, and rather than being taken in by the vampire community (if *community* is the right word) that created him or her, they are dumped somewhere that they will be found by ordinary humans before the sun gets them the next morning. And then they have to spend the rest of their, so to speak, lives, in a kind of half prison, half asylum, under doctors' orders—and of course under guard. I'd heard, although I had no idea if it was true, that these miserable ex-people are executed—drugged senseless and then staked, beheaded, and burned—when they reached what would have been their normal life expectancy if they'd been alive in the usual way.

One of the origins of the Voodoo Wars was that the vampires, tired of being the only ones of the Big Three, major-league Other Folk coherently and comprehensively legislated against, created a lot of vampires that they left for us humans to look after, and then organized them—somehow—into a wide-scale breakout. Vampirism doesn't generally do a lot for your personality—that is, a lot of good—and the vampires had chosen as many really nice people as possible to turn, to emphasize their disenchantment with the present system. Membership in the Supergreens, for example, plummeted by something like forty percent during the Voodoo Wars, and a couple of big national charities had to shut down for a few years.

It's not that any of the Others are really popular, or that it had only been the vampires against us during the Wars. But a big point about vampires is that they are the only ones that can't hide what they are: let a little sunlight touch them and they burst into flames. Very final flames. Exposure and destruction in one neat package. Weres are only in danger once a month, and there are drugs that will hold the Change from happening. The drugs are illegal, but then so are coke and horse and hypes and rats'-brains and trippers. If you want the anti-Change drugs you can get them. (And most Weres do. Being a Were isn't as bad as being a vampire, but it's bad enough.) And a lot of demons look perfectly normal. Most demons have some funny habit or other but unless you live with one and catch it eating garden fertilizer or old combox components or growing scaly wings and floating six inches above the bed after it falls asleep, you'd never know. And some demons are pretty nice, although it's not something you want to count on. (I'm talking about the Big Three, which everyone does, but "demon" is a pretty catch-all term really, and it can often turn out to mean what the law enforcement official on the other end of it wants it to mean at the time.)

The rest of the Others don't cause much trouble, at least not officially. It is pretty cool to be suspected of being a fallen angel, and everyone knows someone with sprite or peri blood. Mary, at the coffeehouse, for example. Everyone wants her to pour their coffee because coffee poured by Mary is always hot. She doesn't know where this comes from, but she doesn't deny it's some kind of Other blood. So long as Mary sticks to being a waitress at a coffeehouse, the government turns a blind eye to this sort of thing.

But if anyone ever manages to distill a drug that lets a vampire go out in daylight they'll be worth more money in a month than the present total of all bank balances held by everyone on the global council. There are a lot of scientists and backyard bozos out there trying for that jackpot—on both sides of the line. The smart money is on the black-market guys, but it's conceivable that the guys in the white hats will get

there first. It's a more and more open secret that the suckers in the asylums are being experimented on—for their own good, of course. That's another result of the Voodoo Wars. The global council claims to want to “cure” vampirism. The legit scientists probably aren't starting with autopsyrocy, however. (At least I don't think they are. Our June holiday Monday is for Hiroshi Gutter-man who managed to destroy a lot of vampires single-handedly, but probably *not* by being a Naga demon and closing his sun-proof hood at an opportune moment, because aside from not wanting to think about even a full-blood Naga having a hood big enough, there are no plausible rumors that either the suckers or the scientists are raising cobras for experiments with their skins.)

There are a lot of vampires out there. Nobody knows how many, but a lot. And the clever ones—at least the clever and lucky ones—tend to wind up wealthy. Really old suckers are almost always really wealthy suckers. Any time there isn't any other news for a while you can pretty well count on another big article all over the globenet debating how much of the world's money is really in sucker hands, and those articles are an automatic pickup for every national and local paper. Maybe we're all just paranoid. But there's another peculiarity about vampires. They don't, you know, *breed*. Oh, they make new vampires—but they make them out of pre-existing people. Weres and demons and so on can have kids with ordinary humans as well as with each other, and often do. At least some of the time it's because the parents love each other, and love softens the edges of xenophobia. There are amazing stories about vampire sex and vampire orgies (there would be) but there's never been even a half-believable myth about the birth of a vampire or half-vampire baby.

(Speaking of sucker sex, the most popular story concerns the fact that since vampires aren't alive, all their lifelike activities are under their voluntary control. This includes the obvious ones like walking, talking, and biting people, but it also includes the ones that are involuntary in the living: like the flow of their blood. One of the first stories that any teenager just waking up to carnal possibilities hears about male vampires is that *they can keep it up indefinitely*. I personally stopped blushing after I had my first lover, and discovered that absolutely the last thing I would want in a boyfriend is a permanent hard-on.)

So the suckers are right, humans *do* hate them in a single-mindedly committed way that is unlike our attitude to any of the other major categories of Others. But it's hardly surprising. Vampires hold maybe one-fifth of the world's capital *and* they're a race incontestably apart. Humans don't like ghouls and lamias either, but the rest of the undead don't last long, they're not very bright, and if one bites you, every city hospital emergency room has the antidote (supposing there's enough of you left for you to run away with). The global council periodically tries to set up “talks” with vampire leaders in which they offer an end to persecution and legal restriction and an inexhaustible supply of pigs' blood in exchange for a promise that the vampires will stop preying on people. In the first place this doesn't work because while vampires tend to hunt in packs, the vampire population as a whole is a series of little fiefdoms, and alliances are brief and rare and usually only exist for the purpose of destroying some mutually intolerable other sucker fiefdom. In the second place the bigger the gang and the more powerful the master vampire, the less he or she moves around, and leaving headquarters to sit on bogus human global council “talks” is just not sheer. And third,

pigs' blood isn't too popular with vampires. It's probably like being offered Cava when you've been drinking Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin all your life. (The coffeehouse has a beer and wine license, but Charlie has a soft spot for champagne. Charlie's was once on a globenet survey of restaurants, listed as the only coffeehouse anybody had ever heard of that serves champagne by the glass. You might be surprised how many people like bubbly with their meatloaf or even their cream cheese on pumpernickel.)

Okay, so I'm a little obsessed. Some people adore soap operas. Some people are neurotic about sports. I follow stories about the Others. Also, we know more about the Others at the coffeehouse—if we want to—because several of our regulars work for SOF—Special Other Forces. Also known as sucker cops, since, as I say, it's chiefly the suckers they worry about. Mom shuts them up when she catches them talking shop on our premises, but they know they always have an audience in me. I wouldn't trust *any* cop any farther than I could throw our Prometheus, the shining black monster that dominates the kitchen at Charlie's and is the apple of Mel's eye (you understand the connection between motorcycles and cooking when you've seen an industrial-strength stove at full blast), but I liked Pat and Jesse.

Our SOFs say that nobody and nothing will ever enable suckers to go out in daylight, and a good thing too, because daylight is the only thing that is preventing them from taking over the other four-fifths of the world economy and starting human ranching as the next hot growth area for venture capitalists. But then SOFs are professionally paranoid, and they don't have a lot of faith in the guys in lab coats, whether they're wearing black hats or white ones.

There are stories about "good" vampires like there are stories about the loathly lady who after a hearty meal of raw horse and hunting hound and maybe the odd huntsman or archer, followed by an exciting night in the arms of her chosen knight, turns into the kindest and most beautiful lady the world has ever seen; but according to our SOFs no human has ever met a good vampire, or at least has never returned to say so, which kind of tells its own tale, doesn't it? And the way I see it, the horse and the hounds and the huntsman are still dead, and you have to wonder about the psychology of the chosen knight who goes along with all the carnage *and* the fun and frolic in bed on some dubious grounds of "honor."

Vampires kill people and suck their blood. Or rather the other way around. They like their meat alive and frightened, and they like to play with it a while before they finish it off. Another story about vampires is that the one domestic pet a vampire may keep is a cat, because vampires understand the way cats' minds work. During the worst of the Voodoo Wars anyone who lived alone with a cat was under suspicion of being a vampire. There were stories that in a few places where the Wars were the worst, solitary people with cats who didn't burst into flames in daylight were torched. I hoped it wasn't true, but it might have been. There are always cats around Charlie's, but they are usually refugees seeking asylum from the local rat population, and rather desperately friendly. There are always more of them at the full moon too, which goes to show that not every Were chooses—or, more likely in Old Town, can afford—to go the drug route.

So when I swam back to consciousness, the fact that I was still alive and in one piece wasn't reassuring. I was propped against something at the edge of a ring of firelight. Vampires can see in the dark and they don't cook their food, but they seem to

like playing with fire, maybe the way some humans get off on joyriding stolen cars or playing last-across on a busy railtrack.

I came out of it feeling wretchedly sick and shaky, and of course scared out of my mind. They'd put some kind of Breath over me. I knew that vampires don't have to stoop to blunt instruments or something on a handkerchief clapped over your face. They can just breathe on you and you are out cold. It isn't something they can all do, but nearly all vampires hunt in packs since the Wars, and being the Breather to a gang had become an important sign of status (according to globenet reports). They can *all* move utterly silently, however, and, over short distances, faster than anything—well, faster than anything *alive*—as well. So even if the Breath went wrong somehow they'd catch you anyway, if they wanted to catch you.

"She's coming out of it," said a voice.

I'd never met a vampire before, nor heard one speak, except on TV, where they run the voice through some kind of antiglamor technology so no one listening will march out of their house and start looking for the speaker. I can't imagine that a vampire would want everyone listening to its voice to leap out of their chairs and start seeking it, but I don't know how vampires (or cats, or loathly ladies) think, and maybe it would want to do this. And there is, of course, a story, because there is always a story, that a master vampire can tune its voice so that maybe only one specific person of all the possibly millions of people who hear a broadcast (and a sucker interview is always a big draw) will jump out of their chair, etc. I don't think I believe this, but I'm just as glad of the antiglamor tech. But whatever else it does, it makes their voices sound funny. Not human, but not human in a clattery, mechanical, microchip way.

So in theory I suppose I shouldn't have known these guys were vampires. But I did. If you've been kidnapped by the Darkest Others, you know it.

In the first place, there's the smell. It's not at all a butcher-shop smell, as you might expect, although it does have that metallic blood tang to it. But meat in a butcher's shop is dead. I know this is a contradiction in terms, but vampires smell of *live* blood. And something else. I don't know what the something else is; it's not any animal, vegetable, or mineral in my experience. It's not attractive or disgusting, although it does make your heart race. That's in the genes, I suppose. Your body knows it's prey even if your brain is fuddled by the Breath or trying not to pay attention. It's the smell of vampire, and your fight-or-flight instincts take over.

There aren't many stories of those instincts actually getting you away though. At that moment I couldn't think of any.

And vampires don't move like humans. I'm told that young ones can "pass" (after dark) if they want to, and a popular way of playing chicken among humans is to go somewhere there's a rumor of vampires and see if you can spot one. I knew Kenny and his buddies had done this a few times. I did it when I was their age. It's not enormously dangerous if you stay in a group and don't go into the no-man's-land around the big cities. We're a medium-sized city and, as I say, we're pretty clean. It's still a dumb and dangerous thing to do—dumber than my driving out to the lake should have been.

The vampires around the bonfire weren't bothering not to move like vampires.

Also, I said that the antiglam tech makes sucker voices sound funny on TV and radio and the globenet. They sound even funnier in person. Funny peculiar. Funny

awful.

Maybe there's something about the Breath. I woke up, as I say, sick and wretched and *scared*, but I should have been freaked completely past thought and I wasn't. I knew this was the end of the road. Suckers don't snatch people and then decide they're not very hungry after all and let them go. I was dinner, and when I was finished being dinner, I was dead. But it was like: okay, that's the way it goes, bad luck, damn. Like the way you might feel if your vacation got canceled at the last minute, or you'd spent all day making a fabulous birthday cake for your boyfriend and tripped over the threshold bringing it in and it landed upside down on the dog. *Damn*. But that's all.

I lay there, breathing, listening to my heart race, but feeling this weird numb composure. We were still by the lake. From where I half-lay I could see it through the trees. It was still a beautiful serene moonlit evening.

"Do we take her over immediately?" This was the one who had noticed I was awake. It was a little apart from the others, and was sitting up straight on a tree stump or a rock—I couldn't see which—as if keeping watch.

"Yeah. Bo says so. But he says we have to dress her up first." This one sounded as if it was in charge. Maybe it was the Breather.

"Dress her *up*? What is this, a party?"

"I thought we had the party while ..." said a third one. Several of them laughed. Their laughter made the hair on my arms stand on end. I couldn't distinguish any individual shapes but that of the watcher. I couldn't see how many of them there were. I thought I was listening to male voices but I wasn't sure. That's how weird sucker voices are.

"Bo says our ... *guest* is old-fashioned. Ladies should wear dresses."

I could feel them looking at me, feel the glint of their eyes in the firelight. I didn't look back. Even when you already know you're toast you don't look in vampires' eyes.

"She's a lady, huh."

"Don't matter. She'll look enough like one in a dress." They all laughed again at this. I may have whimpered. One of the vampires separated itself from the boneless dark slithery blur of vampires and came toward me. My heart was going to lunge out of my mouth but I lay still. I was, strangely, beginning to feel my way into the numbness—as if, if I could, I would find the center of *me* again. As if being able to think clearly and calmly held any possibility of doing me any good. I wondered if this was how it felt when you woke up in the morning on the day you knew you were going to be executed.

One of the things you need to understand is that I'm not a brave person. I don't put up with being messed around, and I don't suffer fools gladly. The short version of that is that I'm a bitch. Trust me, I can produce character references. But that's something else. I'm not *brave*. Mel is brave. His oldest friend told me some stories about him once I could barely stand to *listen* to, about dispatch riding during the Wars, and Mel'd been pissed off when he found out, although he hadn't denied they happened. Mom is brave: she left my dad with no money, no job, no prospects—her own parents had dumped her when she married my dad, and her younger sisters didn't find her again till she resurfaced years later at Charlie's—and a six-year-old daughter. Charlie is brave: he started a coffeehouse by talking his bank into giving him a loan on his house

back in the days when you only saw rats, cockroaches, derelicts, and Charlie himself on the streets of Old Town.

I'm not brave. I make cinnamon rolls. I read a lot. My idea of excitement is Mel popping a wheelie driving away from a stoplight with me on pillion.

The vampire was standing right next to me. I didn't think I'd seen it walk that far. I'd seen it stand up and become one vampire out of a group of vampires. Then it was standing next to me. It. He. I looked at his hand as he held something out to me. "Put it on." I reluctantly extended my own hand and accepted what it was. He didn't seem any more eager to touch me than I was to touch him; the thing he was offering glided from his hand to mine. He moved away. I tried to watch, but I couldn't differentiate him from the shadows. He was just *not there*.

I stood up slowly and turned my back on all of them. You might not think you could turn your back on a lot of vampires, but do you want to watch while they check the rope for kinks and the security of the noose and the lever on the trap door or do you maybe want to close your eyes? I turned my back. I pulled my T-shirt off over my head and dropped the dress down over me. The shoulder straps barely covered my bra straps and my neck and shoulders and most of my back and breast were left bare. Buffet dining. Very funny. I took my jeans off underneath the long loose skirt. I still had my back to them. I was hoping that vampires weren't very interested in a meal that was apparently going to someone else. I didn't like having my back to them but I kept telling myself it didn't matter (there are guards to grab you if the lever still jams on the first attempt and you try to dive off the scaffold). I was very carefully clumsy and awkward about taking my jeans off, and in the process tucked my little jackknife up under my bra. It was only something to do to make me feel I hadn't just given up. What are you going to do with a two-and-a-half-inch folding blade against a lot of vampires?

I'd had to take my sneakers off to get out of my jeans, and I looked at them dubiously. The dress was silky and slinky and it didn't go with sneakers, but I didn't like going barefoot either.

"That'll do," said the one who had given me the dress. He reappeared from the shadows. "Let's go."

*And he reached out and took my arm.*

Physically I only flinched; internally it was revolution. The numbness faltered and the panic broke through. My head throbbed and swam; if it hadn't been for those tight, terrifying fingers around my upper arms I would have fallen. A second vampire had me by the other arm. I hadn't seen it approach, but at that moment I couldn't see anything, feel anything but panic. It didn't matter that they had to have touched me before—when they caught me, when they put me under the dark, when they brought me to wherever we were—I hadn't been conscious for that. I was conscious *now*.

But the numbness—the weird detached composure, whatever it was—pulled itself together. It was the oddest sensation. The numbness and the panic crashed through my spasming body, and the numbness won. My brain stuttered like a cold engine and reluctantly fired again.

The vampires had dragged me several blind steps while this was going on. The numbness now noted dispassionately that they were wearing gloves. As if this suddenly made it all right the panic subsided. One of my feet hurt; I'd already