

LOVE BITES

A STORY ABOUT
LIFE, THE UNDEAD,
AND THE FATE OF
EVERY PERSON
EVER BITTEN
BY A VAMPIRE



ED CYZEWSKI

Endorsements

“In a world filled with knock-offs, unoriginal material, and shameless knock-offs, Ed Cyzewski has given us what we’re afraid to ask for: a shameless, unoriginal, vampire knock-off.”

–**Literary Agent**

“*Love Bites* is a triumph of the postmodern milieu, mindlessly mashing theology and culture together without a point.”

–**Theology Professor**

“Ed Cyzewski offers a strong apologetic against eternal undead life for all vampires.”

–**Pastor and Christian Apologist**

“Cyzewski’s prose highlights the trivialities and vapid concerns of modern life—creating the perfect medium for a story about the undead. Who are the real undead? Cyzewski raises the question without providing simple answers—if any answers at all.”

–**Bestselling Novelist**

Love Bites

A Story about Life, the Undead, and the Fate
of Every Person Ever Bitten by a Vampire

Ed Cyzewski

Visit Ed's web site www.edcyz.com.

@ Ed Cyzewski, April 1, 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from Ed Cyzewski, edcyzewski@gmail.com, which he will gladly give if you ask him nicely.

Cover Design by Ed Cyzewski and his team of rabbits: Eva, Evan, and Baxter.

Cover Photograph of Apple via "MsDotty" at www.sxc.hu. Used according to site's terms.

The characters in this novella parody are fictional composites with a few quirks and qualities of real characters. The author does not believe any of the real life characters this book portrays are really vampires, werewolves, or writers with grammar quite this bad.

To Ned, the Family Cat:

You're still a great cat even if you've
always liked my sisters better than me.

To Eva, the Family Rabbit:

You're way cooler than Ned the cat.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Forward by Ned Ciwinski	8
Prologue of Critical Importance	9
Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	16
Chapter Three	21
Chapter Four	30
Chapter Five	34
Chapter Six	41
Chapter Seven	46
Chapter Eight	50
Chapter Nine	55
About the Author	61

Acknowledgements

This book came together because one smart, brave, wise woman was willing to listen to me pitch lame idea after lame idea for my April 1st book release. That smart, brave, wise woman is my wife Julie. She watched me agonize over this book project and cheered me on as it picked up steam. Every writer needs that kind of support, and I'm a lucky man to have a wife who can offer it so freely and regularly.

I'm grateful for friends who offered their advice and insights at key times, especially vampire book expert Emma Liddle and editor extraordinaire Thomas Turner. Matthew Paul Turner proved invaluable in refining the title.

I would be remiss if I didn't also thank my small group for all of the endless speculation about possible vampire books we could one day write. Our mocking of popular vampire books was invaluable while working on this project.

Lastly, to the many people who have mispronounced my name "Ciwinski"... You astonish me. Cyzewski lacks the "n" required for such a pronunciation, and yet you bravely soldier on and drop that "n" in there because you think you know how to pronounce an Americanized Polish name. You always made me feel special during roll call time at school and are no doubt the reason why I intend to add a few more "z's" and silent "w's" to my name as soon as the paperwork comes through.

Foreword by Ned Ciwinski

Every author today wants to cash in on the easy money that can be made by writing the next big vampire epic, and Ed Cyzewski is no different from all the rest. I envy the way he has casually dabbled in the world of vampires without any true expertise and research. Though lacking in these essentials, he has still published a book that he's willing to slap in front of readers.

In Sporks, MI, we have a little saying, "You're a stranger, until I know you." Well, I suppose it's more my own saying than a regional one. Still, it captures the spirit of what I want to say. Perhaps you are a stranger to Ed Cyzewski. After you read this book, you'll know a little about him. However, he's one of those pesky writers who prefers parables, stories, and questions, rather than hard, honest, reliable facts. If anything, Ed Cyzewski introduces you to another stranger that you need to meet if you want to learn anything of value about vampires: me—Ned Ciwinski.

Ed Cyzewski offers a cursory overview of vampires, their habits, and how they interact with humans, but he only scratches the surface. If reading his silly, speculative, fact-light, little story provides a simple entry point into the more serious, constructive field of vampirology, then I'm happy to endorse this book. I suppose you'll have fun laughing at the way he portrays me and my work, but in the end, your mind will be opened to fresh, exciting possibilities about vampires. You'll be ready to take the next step in your quest here on earth: purchasing my book *Coffeehouse Vampirology*.

-Ned Ciwinski, Sporks, MI
Resident Theologian at the Holy Grounds Café
Author of *Coffeehouse Vampirology*

Prologue of Critical Importance

I suppose you're reading this because you thought this may be a funny book. While I certainly intend that to be the case, parodies that touch on otherwise important and serious topics may cause certain readers to wonder if the author has an agenda or if he's trying to slam any particular person, view, or book. While I love a bit of mystery and uncertainty in my books, I'm not a mean or vindictive person—unless I'm dealing with Ned Ciwinski—and it's important that my readers understand where I'm coming from and that this book was released on April first.

This book is not intended to attack any particular perspective about Rob Bell, hell, or vampire books. It all began with a simple thought, “What if I combined a Rob Bell book with a vampire book?” I didn't see how that could not be funny, and I slapped a parody of myself in there for good measure. Every plot decision was based on either moving the inane story forward or making a joke.

Stephen King says that writing a story is like digging up bones. You can plan ahead, but as you write, you always end up discovering something that fits into the whole perfectly. The “perfect” in this case was a good joke in the service of a parody, and I made several discoveries along the way—including the surprise ending.

If you've at least watched one of Rob Bell's Nooma videos or read one of his books, you may catch more of the humor. Unless you're familiar with the popular vampire novels and shows that I'm parodying, you'll wonder if I know how to use a dash properly or if I have any clue what really goes on in the female mind.

Don't base your judgments of my theology and beliefs on a silly bit of fiction that's nothing more than an attempt to help us take a deep breath and laugh at a few jokes. If any of the material in this book proves to be offensive, that is surely the result of Ned Ciwinski's consultation and incessant meddling throughout the writing process.

-Ed Cyzewski, Storrs, CT
Author of *Coffeehouse Theology*
www.edcyz.com

Chapter One

Michigan is lame. I'm leaving my beloved, sunny, beautiful, idyllic home in Florida to go to college in a small town called Sporks on the northern tip of the Michigan mitt where the sun rarely shines and depressed spirits roam the landscape. I've got my reasons for going there. I'm just not telling you. Maybe I want to intrigue you. Maybe I don't know. Maybe I forgot. I don't really care.

Perhaps I'm going to college up there because my dad lives nearby Stoker College, and he's going to buy me a car—most likely a used one because that's my burden in life. Still, a car is my birthright as a privileged child of the suburbs—that and a cell phone. I love my cell phone. It's so reliable—unlike my deadbeat mom who doesn't know how to write a check or make instant mac and cheese. Now that my mom's shacking up with some guy who will at least make sure she pays the bills, I am free to inexplicably leave my beloved home state of Florida so I can go to college in Sporks, Michigan.

I can't explain it—there's almost this whisper calling me to Sporks. It's like a low, hushed voice—like a whisper. Yeah, I can't explain it. I just know that I need to go to Sporks.

On the plane I watched the sunny, cheerful shapes and colors of Florida pass away, yielding to the thick, brooding gloom of Michigan. My dad picked me up at the airport—not literally. We just sort of hugged, and he retreated behind a pillar, flushed with shame at expressing any kind of perceptible emotion.

We hardly spoke during the ride to Sporks. That is, except for the fact that he mentioned my new car was waiting for me at his place.

“I got you a vintage Ford Explorer. It’s bad on gas, but you sit high up and it will protect you.”

“Protect me from what?” I was indignant that he would care about my safety. Why couldn’t he just give me the money and car that I needed and avoid all of this parental concern?

“It’s not like Florida up here, Eva,” he said, glancing to meet my withering gaze. We made eye contact for several seconds, and immediately shifted our eyes back onto the road. “There are Democrats buzzing around in these little fuel efficient cars everywhere. It’s terrifying.”

I shivered at the thought.

“Of course there are rumors of these cold, hollow people who roam the woods and suck human blood, but I don’t believe any of it. I’m more worried about Democrats stealing our freedom and turning us into Canada.”

My heart began to race. “Daddy, can we *see* Canada from Sporks?”

“Only on a clear day. We only have one or two clear days each year”

“Good.” I felt better. “Thanks for the car, er, S.U.V.”

“You’re welcome, Eva.” He blushed and hid his face by scratching the top of his head.

After we’d exhausted our latest TV viewing habits and sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity, we pulled into his driveway where my navy blue Ford Explorer waited. I loaded my suitcases into the back, and we headed off to campus so I could settle into my dorm room.

The voice whispering in my mind began to roar like thunder—a gentle, quiet roaring thunder.

The roads leading to Stoker College were clogged with cars jam-packed with weeping students and plastic junk from Wal-Mart. Pulling up outside of Stake Hill dorm, I saw a beautiful young man walking down the sidewalk toward us. He had pale skin, a soft, radiant face, and a hip, fitted black jacket matched with black jeans—he could have just walked out of an Urban Outfitter if we weren’t trapped in the desolation of Sporks, Michigan. His angelic eyes were framed by thick, black-rimmed glasses. It

seemed that he was talking to himself. Almost as if he was talking to someone. He was panting, and mumbling as he walked along. I wanted him to stop, to look into my eyes, and to say something.

My heart almost stopped when he spun around right in front of me. Our eyes meet. His held the key to eternity, to untold years in the past and unknown years in the future. My eyes were dull and uninteresting. The voice in my head stopped. As I looked into his deep blue eyes, I realized that I was nothing compared to his perfection. How could I ever find a greater beauty than this being before me? His lips moved.

“Have you ever noticed that moving is hard?”

“Um,” I said, but he continued.

“We have all of this baggage. We load up our lives, what we’ve accumulated, and then we drive off to some strange place. And we’re uprooted. Lost. Uncertain.”

“I suppose.”

“You know, I have... this... friend. He moved once, and he told me that it took him months to readjust, to find his way again. He had all of these questions about who he was, where he was going, and what the meaning of life is.”

“Deep.”

“Yes, and as we get into the deep things of this life, we find ourselves tossed by the waves and asking questions.”

“I’ve got a few questions...”

“Questions like, if this is such a beautiful, orderly world, why are we uprooted? Why do we move to new places? Why not stay put? Why not find the beautiful things where we are?”

He stopped and sighed heavily. I didn’t know what he was talking about, but it didn’t matter. I could look into his eyes, drinking in his elegance, his perfection.

Taking a deep breath first, he finally asked, “Need help moving in?”

“Are you an RA?”

“Of sorts.”

“Sure. What’s your name?”

“Thomas.”

“My name is Eva.”

He nodded, and then took both of my suitcases, three bags of towels and bedding, and my cosmetics box from the back of the Explorer. My dad gaped as Thomas tramped into the dorm ahead of us at a brisk pace. How did a person of his size carry so much?

The voice whispered in my mind, He’s just balancing his weight properly. He’s an RA. He’s a professional mover.

That sounded about right to me. And besides, how could I bother worrying about this a beautiful young man?

My dad drove off, leaving me with my Explorer and my mysterious stranger. He sat in the chair at my desk while I unpacked.

“Have you ever thought about what happens after you die?” Thomas asked. He was leaning forward, almost tasting me as I put my clothes away in the closet. I thought of kissing his lips, and wondered if that very act may kill me. What would happen after I kissed Thomas, the most beautiful boy I’d ever met? Who cares? Life, death, it didn’t matter.

I realized that he was looking at me quizzically, as if he was confused by my silence, as if he didn’t understand what was going on in my mind. That is, unless he did understand what was going on in my mind and that made him quizzical. I wasn’t sure what kind of quizzical look he had on his face. He rubbed at his jaw and adjusted his glasses. How could I say anything? I despised the sound of my voice in his presence. His voice was soft, sweet, and thick with the overtones of an eternal love that pulsed with a desire that had been building for hundreds of years.

“I mean, some people say this is it. Get it while you’re still breathing. Religious people believe that we’ll meet God after we die and some will go to heaven and others to hell. But is that it?”

“Is that what?” I asked in my horrible, high-pitched, whining voice.

“I mean, are there any other options? Can we die in such a way that we aren’t fully dead? You know, I have a friend...”

“She or he?”

“Huh?” he asked, visibly shaken, as if I’d startled him and surprised him in some way that he didn’t expect.

“Is your friend a boy or a girl?”

“A guy.”

“Good,” I practically purred in reply.

“My friend met one of these undead people once.”

“Really?”

“And he realized that all of our answers are really just questions. It’s like our world is a game of Jeopardy... What does it mean for our lives here and now if some of the dead aren’t really dead? Is it possible to be alive and simultaneously dead? What if we could see beauty and wonder, and yet we’re not alive to truly experience it? And what if...”

I cut my finger on a metal hanger. It was a long cut, bloody and messy. A huge drop of blood fell to the linoleum floor right in front of Thomas. He couldn’t finish his sentence. He just gaped at me with his jaw hanging and short gasps of breath coming out. His breathing became deeper and heavier as I sucked on my finger to keep the blood from dripping all over the room. Rooting through one of my bags, I found a box of band aids.

The sound of a chair crashing across the room and shuffling feet startled me, and I turned around to see what happened. Thomas bolted across the room, swiping his finger to wipe up the blood from the floor as he charged out of the room. “Get that cleaned out and properly digested... I mean, er, bandaged,” he yelled as he ran down the hall.

My heart sank. Why had he left so abruptly? Did he have an appointment somewhere? My chair had been overturned and tossed to the other side of the room, leaving a dent in the heater below the dreary, useless window that would only reveal which shade of gray awaited me each day. Looking down at the spot on the floor where my blood had been, I saw only a faint smear. Why did he sweep it up as he ran out of the room?

The faint voice in my mind whispered, He’s very sensitive around blood. He was afraid of fainting in front of you because he likes you so

much. Even perfect people get embarrassed sometimes. He's also very type-A and conscientious about keeping the dorm clean.

Of course, how could I have been so imperceptive and stupid? He was sensitive around blood. I've heard about people who can't handle the sight of blood. My poor love! I pitied Thomas. What a burden to be so sensitive around blood. I resolved that I would help him conquer his fear of blood some day.

"Good idea," whispered the voice. "And stay away from boys named Max."

Chapter Two

Everyone else I met at college was boring and ugly compared to Thomas. He kept a low profile for the rest of the day, so I had to console myself with my chatty roommate from Muncie, Indiana who constantly looked at herself in the mirror, running a brush through her blond hair. She couldn't believe I hadn't heard of Muncie.

"Muncie's got the biggest high school gym in America!"

She spent the rest of the following hour chattering about how no one knows that Indiana has beaches and how no one knows why they call it the Hoosier state, which led to the unfortunate discovery that I'd never seen the movie *Hoosiers*. As she launched into a scene by scene summary of the movie, I sensed a dark, brooding, masculine presence in the doorway. Should I be afraid?

Looking up, I saw a broad-shouldered, muscular stranger with a smirk—one side of his face twitched with a smile that hinted at perfectly white teeth. His arms bulged with muscles larger than any I'd ever seen. It was as if he'd been working out for centuries.

"May I come in?" he asked with a deep, sensual growl—the most pleasant growl I'd ever heard. I nodded and wondered if he was a man or a college student.

"Neither," the whisper in my mind said. I told the voice to hush and get lost.

"So, you must be Eva," he began and then quickly added, "I noticed your name on the door."

"My name's Stacy!" my roommate said, delighted to be so close to masculine perfection. Her hand disappeared for a moment as he shook her hand. I noted that her name is Stacy, something I'd tuned out. When

someone talks so much, it's hard to know when to tune in and when to tune out. I should just call her Hoosier anyway just to get her worked up.

Turning from Stacy, who settled into a chair at her desk, the man looked at me. His eyes were a steely blue, and his hair fell in gentle wisps along his commanding forehead.

“My name is Max.”

“Are you a freshman Max?”

“Me?” he asked with surprise. As if I'd bother saying anything to my stupid roommate. “No, I've been here a while. I'm actually a... uh... *friend* of Thomas. We go wayyyyy back.”

He had hissed the word friend in such a way that I almost jumped.

“Thomas is nice enough,” he grumbled, “But he's not much help when it comes to learning the ropes at this... college.”

“I could hardly get a word in around him today,” I said. “Not that I minded all that much.”

“I suppose it's only right for the woman to keep silent.” He seemed pleased, and I felt my jaw dropping. What a terrible thing to say. However, as I watched his biceps lightly flexing under his impossibly tight t-shirt, all offense was forgotten.

“Anyway,” he continued, “With all of that talking, he probably forgot to show you around. How about we take a walk?”

Now Stacy's jaw dropped. I mean, I'm nothing to look at—just straight brown hair, a wiry frame, and hazel eyes that my father once said were pretty before locking himself in his room for a week. My heart was pounding. I had been noticed by another flawless man in the same day. What could be wrong with that? I'd spent too many evenings at home keeping my mom from buying rare banjos on EBay. I was ready to give in to the pulsating passion that sent me to my feet.

As I walked out with Max, I wondered if I was in danger. Could I trust him? I slipped into my rain jacket since a light mist hung in the air, a cold shower that reminded me of Thomas. Where was he right now? The thought of looking into his eyes again caused me to slow my pace.

“Are you okay?” Max was all concern, pleading eyes, and chivalry. Of course I was safe. He had the rough look of a cage fighter, but I could tell that beneath his steely outside, he was warm and gentle.

“I thought I forgot something, but I’m fine. Where should we go first?”

Walking down from Stake Hill Dorm, Max led me past the tall, brick dorms that formed a kind of protective barrier around the campus. Walking along a well-maintained brick sidewalk, he pointed to the cafeteria with its large windows looking out on a small retention pond. In the dim mid-day light I could still see that everything around me was lush and green.

“Is that cafeteria the only place to eat around here?” I asked.

“There are a few other places,” he sneered, becoming impatient and quickening his pace as we passed through larger crowds of freshmen wandering about campus, trying to find their orientation programs. I wondered if I should be doing the same—I was here to learn after all. But then again, I’d never had much time for dating while taking care of my mother. Besides, Max walked so fast that I could only think about quickening my pace in order to keep up with him.

We soon passed through another cluster of dorms on the other end of campus and continued on a dirt pathway, well-worn and eroded with rocks jutting out and poking my feet through my thin sneakers. Instead of relaxing in the relative seclusion of a large field, Max only became more aggravated and restless. We were making rapid progress toward a trailhead leading into a large, dark, gloomy forest—just the kind of thing I’d expect to find in northern Michigan. Max remained silent. He clearly had something on his mind, but what?

Was it possible that he didn’t know what to say to a girl when alone with her? That had to be it. He had asked me out for a walk, but now he was a shy, lost puppy. When he’d tried to say something about the cafeteria he’d lost his way in the conversation as the other students swarmed around us. Now he couldn’t recapture the cool he had when we were alone in my dorm room.

“Max, would you like to go back to my room to talk?”

“No, that won’t help. I, I just need to sometimes... go. For walks in the woods I mean.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Yeah?” he asked, a little breathless, almost panting. I couldn’t believe someone in his kind of shape could get winded from such a short walk. I’m no athlete, but even I could keep this kind of pace without doing his kind of panting.

“Not much further now,” he whispered.

“Further to what? I can’t imagine there being anything worth seeing in a desolate forest like this.”

“It’s a... surprise,” he said as he reached out to take my hand. His touch was cold, and it startled me. I wasn’t sure I wanted to hold his hand. I mean, this guy was hot and he probably had a six pack, but only a few hours before I’d been devoted to Thomas with heart and soul, and I did not forge my romantic attachments lightly.

“Did you ever notice that sometimes we set off on a journey, but we don’t know where we’re going?”

It was Thomas! How did he manage to sneak up on us without making a sound? I must have been thinking too much. I reminded myself that thinking too much could get me into trouble in the future.

“Thomas, you’ve got to cut out all of this snooping around and asking these infernal questions!” Max roared.

Thomas had his hands in the pockets of his black jacket. He casually wiped his glasses clear of mist. Shaking free of Max’s steel grip, I threw myself into his arms. He staggered back a step, surprised at my affection. However, I caught a faint smile on his amazing lips—the source of my destiny.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Thomas, with all of your ridiculous questions. You’re just speculating and putting that girl’s life in danger,” Max boomed as he loomed over us.

Thomas didn't back off. In fact, he stepped forward without a shred of fear in that beautiful, angelic body of his—his eyes sparkled and danced behind his glasses.

“We all have a choice we can make.”

“You're making the wrong choice for her and for the rest of us.”

“We have a chance to stop a lot of evil.”

“What do you know about stopping evil?” Max seethed. “How can you possibly hope to stop what has already happened?” he pointed at himself.

“Maybe you should let us sort this out,” said Thomas. He looked at me with angelic eyes dripping with concern and caution. “I'll drop by your room later to catch up.”

I'd been staring at Thomas, not realizing that he was speaking to me. Max snapped his finger, and I came to. My heart sank for a moment because I couldn't be with Thomas. Everything was better with him. However, I was cheered to know that he'd looked at me and talked to me—what more could a girl ask for, really?

I heard their voices rise and fall across the field as I walked away and a shroud of mist descended.

What could they be so upset about? And what did they mean about me being in danger and wanting to stop evil. I mean, we were in dreary northern Michigan right across a lake from Canada. We may as well have been on the moon. I cheered myself with the thought of picking up some ice cream at dinner that night and calling Stacy “Hoosier” until she stopped talking to me.

Everything was turning out better than I could have ever expected.

Chapter Three

The next morning I walked down the main road leading into downtown Sporks, or at least what would pass for a downtown in a miserable place like this. I often wondered what my father saw in this town, much like I often wondered what he saw in my deadbeat mother who couldn't pay a bill on time—even if you wrote the check and sealed the envelope for her.

Holding a note that Thomas had slipped under my door—passing down the hall like a brisk breeze that hardly made a sound the night before—I searched for the Holy Grounds coffee shop. Downtown Sporks boasted two strip malls, a town hall that used to be a church, and a bunker of a post office. In the first strip mall I passed a pizza joint, the obligatory Chinese restaurant, and the Total E-Clips hair salon. Nothing looked like a café until I reached the end of the second strip mall and saw the sign for Holy Grounds with a halo over the “H” and a pair of sandals along the bottom of the sign. I didn't like the looks of it one bit. There had to be better places to meet. But then again, it was the morning. I couldn't imagine the post office having a table and chairs on hand for a romantic conversation.

Taking a deep breath, I walked in. A rather disheveled man in his early 30's looked up at me as I walked past his table. His hair curled up in two puffy waves from an uneven part, his beard was overgrown, and he wore a ratty black vest over a frayed dress shirt. He was the only other person in the whole café, that is, other than the two employees who stood at the counter and stared out like the living dead in the gloomy room painted in dark orange and brown. I usually enjoy it when men check me out. I mean, that's why I became a cheerleader in high school even with my below average looks. But I couldn't bear to have this creepy, older loser of

a man staring at me. As I walked up to the café counter, doing my best to ignore him, I heard him rustling around in his briefcase. Glancing over, I saw that he moved in quick, jerky movements like a squirrel. I hoped that Thomas would come soon, though the strange man's position in the middle of the café gave him a perfect vantage point for eavesdropping on every conversation. No table sat further than ten feet from him, and I hated him for being such a stalking loser, like my parents, because he couldn't find life and happiness on his own. He had to suck it from young people, hanging around and just latching onto us like some kind of poorly dressed leech.

I'd hardly even noticed that the barista was speaking to me while I'd thought about the grubby man who had now returned to working on his bulky, black computer.

"I'm sorry, I was deep in thought," I apologized with a sincere smile. "What were you saying?"

"Do you want the Roman's Road, Bridge to Life, Big Story, or a classic Christus Victor?"

"Are those kinds of drinks you serve here?" I asked with a stunned silence.

"No, we'll get to the drinks in a minute," the other barista said. I noticed they were both a few inches taller than me and prettier, much prettier. I hated them. Why would Thomas take me to such a horrible place where I could feel insecure about myself?

"We need to present the Gospel to you before you order," the first barista said. "You did realize this is a Christian coffee shop, right?"

"A double-shot of Jesus comes with every cup!" chirped the other barista cheerfully.

"If you got run over by a car on your way home, you'd be glad we included salvation with your drink," added the first barista.

I groaned inwardly. Why did Thomas come here? Was he some kind of fundamentalist who wanted me to convert to his quirky beliefs in order to love me? I mean, I'd do it in a heart-beat. I'd do anything for him—anything to be around his gorgeous, glowing face every day. But what

should I do now? I really wanted coffee, and these tall, beautiful girls seemed intent on making me go through hell, or perhaps heaven in this case, and back in order to avoid the wallop of a caffeine headache. They held all of the cards. I needed coffee, they needed to save me. I gave in.

“What was the last one?”

“Christus Victor,” sighed the barista.

“I don’t think that’s really the Gospel,” whispered the other barista.

“I want that one!” I said, seizing the opportunity to spread discord among them. I’d clearly hit upon a sore point for at least one of them.

“We’ve... got... to... give... it... to... her!” the first barista growled through her teeth at her co-worker.

Wanting to get things moving, I added, “Yes, and the customer is always right. One Chrestus Vector please!”

The other barista sighed as the first barista launched into a tale about sin, evil, and the devil. All of humanity was held prisoner by sin and death, but Jesus defeated them on the cross and set us free. I followed as best I could, but then they started talking about saying a prayer or something and I lost interest. Even the rough-looking man at the other table struck me as more interesting by this point. Zoned out again, I sensed that they were waiting for me to say something. Both of their eyes were wide with expectation.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Do you want to pray the salvation prayer with us right now or do you want to talk with us after you’ve had your coffee.”

“Hmmm,” I said, touching my finger to my chin as if I was about to make the most important, life-changing decision with eternal consequences of my life rather than selecting a kind of coffee drink—mocha or a vanilla latte? Life is filled with such critical decisions sometimes. “I’ll take a café mocha right now.”

The first barista rang up my order, her eyes downcast. The other sulked off and even wiped at her eye, as if drying up a tear. What were they so upset about?

Settling into my seat with a drink and nothing else, I realized I was in a poor strategic position in reference to the rough-looking man who shot glances at me every ten seconds from his table cluttered with a lap top, a Moleskine, and a few books that I imagined to be props that were supposed to make him look intelligent. I couldn't hide myself behind a book or a paper. Whatever he was writing on his computer, he sure wasn't getting a lot done at this rate. I imagined him going home to his camp site or room in the local boarding house—wherever creepy men like him congregate—and telling his friend Butch that he could hardly write because he saw a girl—a real girl today.

Staring at my drink, I noticed the upbeat music playing in the café. It seemed to be a live concert with lots of clapping and cheering. One of the singers sometimes giggled in between lines, and the audience cheered even more. I didn't quite know what to make of it—as if I was confused and uncertain about something I didn't understand.

“You're here to meet the guy with the rad black outfit and the hip glasses, aren't you?”

I looked up to see the scruffy man standing next to me. His pants matched the rest of his outfit—rumpled throughout and tattered on the edges. He held a mug of tea in one hand and a book in the other.

“What are you talking about?”

“I never see anyone here besides myself and that hipster guy who asks a lot of questions. That is, I usually see him in here with some other folks sometimes, but he's always the one bringing them. You don't see many pretty girls like yourself here. Yes, you're very thin and pretty. I can see you haven't had their bottomless basket of bread and fish dip here. It's quite good. It's a great deal, but no one wants to put up with the altar call at the counter.”

“Altar call?” I told myself he'd have an altercation on his hands if he didn't step away.

“You know, the whole salvation bit. I'm glad you chose Christus Victor. It's a very good and ancient explanation of salvation, even if the

one girl is pretty obsessed with Substitutionary Atonement and the Romans Road salvation plan.”

“I think you must have me mixed up with someone who understands what you’re talking about. I’m just here to meet a... friend.” I heard myself say the word, and began to loath myself. How could Thomas be just a friend? He was my whole world, my universe, my reason for existing, for breathing, for hating myself.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Like I said, the good-looking hip guy. Right, right. You’re in love with him and you think you’re going to have some kind of ‘bad romance’ like that Lady Go-go singer talks about.”

I added his lame attempt at being cool to his long list of offenses against me.

“So what if I’m meeting him. And his name is Thomas.”

“Thomas, eh? I never knew that. So, do you know why Thomas is meeting you here today?”

“We’re in love, and it’s none of your business.”

He laughed—a long, hard laughter that tore away at the very foundation of my soul’s summit. I felt my face redden with anger—angrier than I’d ever been toward a loser human being before.

“Look, I’m sorry to laugh. It’s just that you’re in way over your head. You have no idea what you’re dealing with in him. If he seems too good to be true, it’s because he is.”

“What do you know about love?” I wanted it sting him, but he just laughed more.

“Nothing. Nothing. Really, I’m no match for Thomas. No, I know a lot about some other things, such as theology and—you won’t believe this—vampires.”

“So what? I’ve read all of those books about vampires. They’re wonderful. What’s theology got to do with any of it?”

“I’m not sure. You see, I’m very interested in the intersection of faith and culture, and faith has a lot to do with the afterlife. So, you see vampires touch on both of them to a certain degree. In matters of faith vampires are the exception—the one thing that you really can’t sort out

based on the Bible. They're totally off the map for theology. And you surely see that vampires are relevant in today's world. You could say I'm sort of an expert on culturally relevant trendiness and theology."

"Oh really," I said, rolling my eyes with an added jerk of my neck to make sure he got the picture as I looked out the window to see if Thomas was coming. He mistook my minimal verbal response as an invitation to continue.

"Yes, in fact, I wrote this book here." He placed a book on the table titled *Coffeehouse Theology*. It was such an obvious attempt by an unhip author to look—hip. I thought about spilling my drink on it, or saying, "Thanks!" and then using it to balance my table.

"I'm glad you're interested in it," he said.

I suppose that when I didn't say it looked like a sucky book, he thought I was interested in it. I suppose I made the mistake of looking at it too.

"I think your friend Thomas may be the key to my next book."

I almost snorted café mocha out my nose.

"What are you going to call it? Oh, I know!" I said, raising my hands as if I'd had a brainstorm. "How about *Coffeehouse Vampirology*?"

He smiled. Clearly this was way more human interaction than this tattered writer was used to.

"How'd you guess that? You're amazing. Yes, that's actually what the book is called. I wrote it a few years ago, but several publishers turned it down. I don't know why, but one of them asked me if I'd ever talked to a real vampire, and of course I hadn't. I mean, don't Christian authors write books all of the time about stuff they haven't done? That's what I thought at least."

I felt myself sinking into a kind of despairing hatred of this man that I thought could actually lead to killing him. I totally got Macbeth and his knife that guided him to kill the king. A knife in the cafe was dancing its way along the counter, cheerfully pointing at this loser writer.

“Well anyway, I actually self-published the book last spring, but I released it on April 1st. That was a huge mistake. You see, every year I release these fake books as a kind of joke for my friends.”

I couldn't believe he had friends. Maybe they were all Facebook friends who didn't realize what he actually looked like and acted like in real life. I mean, I may have found the one human being on the planet who was a bigger deadbeat than my mother. I literally try to never exaggerate.

“So you see,” he began to laugh in a way that seemed he was on the verge of crying, “All of my friends thought *Coffeehouse Vampirology* was my joke book. I poured ten years, TEN YEARS, of my life into that book. I researched vampires, traveled to Transylvania, and analyzed every vampire text and story in the news. And after I published it, they were telling me how funny it was. I was devastated. It became a sensation for a few days. No one thought I was serious. They said I wrote the funniest book ever about vampires, theology, and coffeehouses.”

“Mmmm. Coffeehouses.” I wasn't listening now. I decided I'd just repeat every last word he said. It was the only way to stave off insanity.

“I almost became a trending topic on Twitter, but even that didn't work! My name is Ned Ciwinski, but my Twitter name is @RealNedCiwinski because there's a potato farmer on Prince Edward Island named Ned Ciwinski who took the username @NedCiwinski. So when a Calvinist blogger wrote a point by point rebuttal of my book and a pastor even wrote “Farewell @Ned Ciwinski!” I didn't get one shred of publicity out of it. Instead, everyone contacted this potato farmer in a Canadian Maritime Province.”

“Canadian Maritime Province!” I had no idea where this was going. I thought of slapping Thomas when he got here. That, or dragging him into the bathroom and making out with him.

“I know! Crazy, right! That guy sold tons of potatoes to everyone. I'll bet you can't find a bag of potatoes on the whole island now after all of that. I've had the worst luck. That's why I need to figure out what a real

vampire is up to. My ticket to success, well, at least a book deal, is Thomas.”

“Thomas? Well, I can help you with that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, sure!” I wanted to crush Ned’s spirit like a little bug. “Thomas is meeting me for coffee. That’s what he’s up to. And then we will leave here without talking to you and go make out somewhere—somewhere preferably dark and private.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“What?”

I was ready to throw my mug at him. He was a pest. If he was me? What a dreadful thought!

“You do realize that Thomas is a vampire.”

“Whatever.”

“I know you don’t believe me. That’s OK. But look, I think there’s something big going on in the vampire world. Something cataclysmic, and that’s what I’m trying to figure out. Thomas is right in the thick of it. If you get tangled up with him, he’ll pull you right into it. Hanging with vampires is like being in with the mob. Getting in may be easy, but leaving it means leaving this world too.”

“Why don’t you just meet him for coffee sometime if you think he’s such a big deal?”

“And blow my cover? No way! If he knows I’m aware of what could be going on in the vampire world, he may attack me.”

“I’d love to see that.”

“I understand your curiosity. I want to see what’s going on in the vampire world too, but not at the cost of putting myself in danger.”

This guy clearly wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer.

The sound of the espresso machine steaming milk made Ned jump.

“Well, I suppose that’s your date. If you ever want to talk sometime—you know, ask some questions—you know where to find me.”

I nodded—glad to know that I could easily avoid him.

“Oh, and here’s your book. I’m part of the unaffiliated mass of young people who are leaving the church in droves, think all Christians are hypocrites, and won’t buy your books.”

He snatched the book from the table and walked away muttering to himself, “Curse you Barna and Kinnaman.”

Thomas, radiant and beautiful, rounded the corner with his mug of coffee. He slipped into the chair across from me and asked me, “Have you ever overslept a really important date?”

Chapter Four

Thomas looked around the café—distracted—nervous—uneasy. He didn't seem to know where to begin—that is, until he began.

“Have you ever wondered why some people ask a lot of questions?”

“Maybe,” I said, wanting to keep the mood playful. All of my annoyance about his tardiness was forgotten immediately. How could I stay angry when he's so perfect?

“Perhaps we're on the brink of something huge, life-changing, and amazing. Something so big it could sweep us off our feet.”

“That's what I'm hoping for.” I couldn't believe he was moving so fast. It was like my wildest dream coming on the heels of meeting my greatest nightmare.

“So you're ready for this?”

“As long as I'm with you, I'll do anything.”

“You do realize there could be danger for you. I mean, things could never be the same for you.” He shifted his eyes around nervously, as if he was uneasy, worried about something.

“Danger?” I laughed. “How could I be in danger around you? I've never been so happy in all my life. You're absolutely perfect.” There, I said it. I meant every word of it. I would have said more if I knew more words that expressed perfection and beauty.

“Eva, you're definitely in danger,” Thomas said, raising his voice. “I don't think you really listened to Ned, did you?”

“Of course not. I'm not going to let some disheveled writer hit on me and talk about how relevant he is and how he knows so much about vampires.”

“But he does.”

“Who cares?”

“I do.”

My jaw dropped.

“You’re into vampire stuff? Wow! I mean, that’s great, but I never pegged you for the type.”

“What type?”

“The type that liked vampires.”

“Liked?”

“Enjoyed, interested in, loved, whatever. Look, Thomas, I care about you. If Ned’s silly *Coffeehouse Vampirology* book is important to you, I’ll read it one day.”

Thomas shifted in his chair and rubbed at his forehead.

“Eva, Ned told you something very, very important. Something that changes everything and determines what you’re going to do next.”

I thought hard about this. His first book was about theology. He had the mix up about the second one on April first. There’s another Ned Ciwinski in the world. What was I missing?

“Do you mean the other Ned Ciwinski who farms potatoes in Canada?”

“No, I’m not talking about a country with national healthcare that forces all citizens to receive basic medical treatment against their will—nothing that horrible.”

“Hmmm,” I said, stalling for time the way I used to wait for someone to answer the question for me in high school when I was stumped. I didn’t much care for this quizzing side of Thomas. I much preferred him when he was quizzical.

“Think back,” Thomas said, his gorgeous eyes still dancing around the room—looking for something. “I have unusual strength, I’m attracted to blood, I live in a climate without any sunshine, and I can whisper little messages into your mind. What am I?”

“Beautiful,” I said, hoping that love would conquer all. He sighed with frustration. Alas, the *Canterbury Tales* proved to be just a bunch of lying rot.

“While I appreciate the sentiment, you aren’t following me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, indignant. How dare he doubt my love and commitment? I wasn’t the one who showed up late for our date.

“No, I mean you aren’t putting two and two together. You really are a bit slow sometimes.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that—all I can think about are your eyes and the way your skin has that soft glow to it.” If he couldn’t see his own beauty, I shuddered at what he must see in my plain face—my body that was hardly worth noticing next to his own.

“Eva, I know I’m beautiful. But I’m not just here to win your heart. I mean, I’m here to do that, but haven’t you ever wondered why I’m different from you?”

My face flushed with anger, but as I looked into his eyes, I could see that he didn’t mean to sting with his words, even though they cut to the core of my weak, ugly, little heart. I relented.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Eva, what did Ned say I am?”

“I don’t know. I think he’s afraid of you anyway, so what does it matter?”

Thomas laughed.

“He’s afraid of me? That’s funny. Why is he afraid of me?”

“Something stupid about you being a vampire. Of course I didn’t believe him. He’s just the sort that would try to get a date with me by pulling some trick like that. Don’t worry, I’m not that gullible. I can think for myself and make important decisions without someone leading me along, explaining everything.”

“Eva.”

“Yes my love?”

“I am a vampire.”

“Oh.”

My heart literally seemed to freeze in place—a frozen beating heart. My head began to spin on top of my frozen torso—not literally.

“You didn’t know?”

“No.”

“Have you ever thought something was too good to be true? Have you ever wondered what people are really like inside?”

“Have you ever needed some fresh air?” I asked with my face hard—
twisted with anger.

I rose and ran from the café.

Chapter Five

I didn't care where I was going. I just needed to get away from Thomas. I needed to think. Why would he tell me he's a vampire with such a serious, dire look on his face? Could he and Ned be friends who were pulling a prank on me?

A truck's screeching brakes dragged me out of my frustration with Thomas. I saw the grill of a pickup truck crashing into me. This was it. The barista knew something. But how? I thought it was just a cheap ploy to convert me, but I guess people get hit by cars all of the time. I wonder what that salvation thing was called that she explained to me.

Standing there, waiting for the end of my life, a life that couldn't have Thomas as just a regular nice guy—a guy who didn't pull pranks on easily led girls—a hand emerged, stopping the truck. It was Thomas. He was panting hard. I looked at him. He looked at me.

How did he do it?

"I just saved your life by stopping a truck," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Have you ever doubted something? Have you ever craved proof that something is true?"

"No, not the questions again. I can't. I can't!"

"What are you doing running into the road like that?" a menacing voice growled at us. "Do you have any idea how high my insurance rates would have gone up if I'd hit you?"

It was Max. He stomped out of the truck. His six pack and biceps bulged and flexed visibly because he didn't have a shirt on. It was tucked in the back pocket of his jeans, lending him the air of a wild beast of a man. Why was I so worried about Thomas when I had another option so readily available? If one's a vampire, the muscular one will do just fine.

“Can I come with you?” I asked Max, whose face creased with a slightly menacing smile.

“Sure. How you feel about that Tommy?”

“Have you ever felt like you’re about to make the biggest mistake of your life?”

“Yes. A few minutes ago in that café. I can’t believe I trusted you.”

“Looks like your plan’s all washed out Tommy,” sneered Max. “Don’t worry your pretty little glasses off. I’ll take care of her—me and the chosen few.”

“In a world with so much beauty and splendor, it pains me to see people making decisions that they’ll regret!” shouted Thomas as I hopped into Max’s truck. We drove away, leaving him with his hands clasped on top of his head. Ned sat on the front porch of the coffee shop jotting down notes on a pad.

“So sweetheart, I’m glad we... ran into each other,” Max said, snickering at his own joke.

How could I have fallen so fast, so fatally, so fitfully, so funnily for Thomas? Here was Max, strong, confident, and clear. He wasn’t asking pesky questions. He either remained quiet or made strong, confident statements—none of this silly questioning of things.

“I’m glad we can talk, Max. I missed you.”

“And speaking of missing, I guess you didn’t much care for Thomas’ little plan?”

“Plan?”

“About killing the big bad, old vampire—it’s crazy, right?”

“What’s all this talk about vampires?”

“You don’t know? Wasn’t Ned there?”

“This is crazy! Crazy! You know that bum too?”

“Of course I know who Ned is. He’s not a bum. He’s supposed to explain things to the people new to vampires. Did you meet him?”

“Unfortunately, yes. He’s such a loser. I mean, you’d never hang out with a guy like him, right?”

“So you know nothing about *Coffeehouse Vampirology*? How dense are you? Do you even know that Thomas is a vampire? Didn’t the thing with the truck sort of convince you? I don’t think you learned anything. It’s a good thing women are supposed to be silent and submissive.”

“Vampires aren’t real. You’re just playing some kind of trick on me with that crazy writer and stopping your truck within an inch of my life. I don’t buy any of it.”

“There are vampires. They’re real. And the biggest, badest, oldest vampire we know of is coming to kill you.”

“What?”

I thought of asking him to pull over the truck, but still, I enjoyed looking at the way his muscles tensed and flexed as he grew more and more aggravated with my dull intelligence. I could act a lot dumber.

“Thomas is a vampire, but he’s not the kind that eats people. Well, I mean he could, but he’s so stupid and self-righteous that he refuses to kill humans. That’s why you’re still alive. Most vampires would have made a quick meal of you. Thankfully they’re all high tailing it out of here just like me since the old timer is coming to town.”

“When are you going out of town?”

“Right now. I thought you realized that Thomas had a stupid, unrealistic, dangerous, and ultimately false plan that runs counter to everything we’ve ever been taught about vampires.”

I decided to go with the insanity for a moment to see if I could somehow figure out where reality ended and fantasies began. It was like a dream that I had to run into with all my mind and will. It was like that time I dreamed about being chased by a large, man-eating rabbit and had to throw myself to the rabbit in order to make it stop chasing me in the dream. I breathed in deep.

“So, supposing Thomas is a vampire and a real vampire is coming to kill me and supposedly everyone else in Sporks, what is the plan that you hate so much?”

“You want to hear his plan? It’s foolish.”

“All of this sounds foolish to me. I would have said at the start of today that Ned is foolish, but now you’re telling me that he’s some kind of genius.”

“Don’t slam Ned ever again. He’s a genius.”

I sighed.

“OK, so you want the plan? Here it is. Thomas has been watching too much *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I mean, it’s a brilliant show, but you can’t fight vampires with karate moves or find the secret spell that will make everything better—even if Willow is my dream woman.”

“You guys watch *Buffy*?”

“Of course. Don’t you?”

“No!”

“Gosh. You really are stupid. Well, anyway, Thomas got this idea that you were some kind of magical slayer who is pure and powerful. The thing is, you don’t know it until you’re actually fighting this big, bad, old, deadly vampire. Pretty much, it involves facing the vampire and he either kills you immediately or you discover you have some kind of power like Buffy.”

“And kill him?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what?”

“Thomas really didn’t tell you any of this?”

“I ran out when he told me he’s a vampire. I thought him and Ned were playing a joke on me.”

“Well, here’s where Thomas really loses me. I mean, you might get lucky and stick a stake in the vamp’s heart or something. That’s well and good. Your odds are like one in a million, but whatever. Have at it.”

I began to wonder if Max really cared for me. Still, he was so bold and beautiful with his six pack.

“The kicker is that Thomas thinks you’ll actually break some kind of curse when, I mean if, you kill this vampire. Every undead vampire and werewolf is guaranteed undead eternal life. Every single one! He thinks this evil vampire is somehow keeping all of the undead from some kind of

life on a higher plane or something. It's foolish. None of the werewolves I know buy it."

"Wait, there are werewolves too? Here in Sporks?"

Max pulled his t-shirt out and tossed it to me. It was torn, tattered, turned into a rag.

"How do you think this happened?"

"You caught it on a fence or something? How should I know?"

"The full moon last night, dummy."

"What about it?"

"What happens to a werewolf when there's a full moon out?"

"How should I know?"

"It's like you don't even have a brain sometimes. Gosh! I turn into a werewolf when the full moon's out. So that means that sexy Maxy better not wear his favorite shirt when it's a full moon. That's what it means."

"You're a werewolf?"

"Gosh, you're dense... Yes! YES! I'm a werewolf!"

"What do werewolves eat?"

"I just told you that a big, horrible vampire is coming."

"Mmm-hmm."

"And he wants to kill you."

"Mmm-hmm."

"And you're asking me what I eat?"

"So?"

"So, that's pretty unimportant with your life on the line. And it gets worse. Look, some vampire sucking you dry of blood is the least of our worries."

I considered feeling wounded.

"If you are the pure, chosen one, or whatever Thomas thinks you are, the curse could work both ways. That vampire needs to kill you in order to control every vampire and werewolf in the world. We all become his slaves, some kind of zombie that does his will. That's the part we all agree on. We all know that he can turn us into slaves by killing you. What we don't know is whether there's anything to you being a slayer who can give

all of us some kind of undead eternal life. That's why we're getting out of here."

I tried to follow along to prove Max wrong about me.

"So, if I kill the vampire, you all get to be undead forever killing humans or animals or whatever you eat—which I still think is kind of important information to know. If I'm killed by the vampire, you all become his slaves who kill humans and animals forever? I guess I'm not seeing the difference here."

"The difference is we are guaranteed being undead for eternity if Thomas is right. Otherwise, only a few are chosen by an ancient decree to be undead for eternity. The rest just kind of fizzle."

"But you're all still undead for a long time, right? I mean, vampires go on living for a while? It seems like you and Thomas are disagreeing over a pretty small point."

Max slammed his fist on the steering wheel and rubbed his forehead. I tried to think of a way to steer the conversation in a less—enraging direction.

"So, are you and Thomas among the chosen?"

"I am. I'm not sure about him. I mean, the chosen are usually pretty level-headed and able to think things through. Thomas is relying on his feelings and too much popular culture junk about vampires. I think Buffy is fun to watch, but he's taking it way too far. He's letting the culture mix up what he believes about vampires, and it could hurt a lot of people. That's why I need to get you away from him and turn you into a vampire as soon as possible."

"Me? A vampire?"

"That's the only way I can save your life. I can't guarantee that you'll become one of the chosen, but at least I'll save you from Thomas' crazy plan that would leave you dead for sure, and most likely end up killing the rest of us. As long as you're human, that vampire will be coming for you."

"But I don't want to be a vampire. They're cold and so, so, dead."

“Undead, actually, and don’t worry. It’ll be fine. Being a vampire is awesome. Sure, you’ll have to get used to drinking the life blood from animals—you’re not Jewish by the way?”

I shook my head, no, for so many reasons.

“Good. So you’ll have to let a vampire bite you. I’ve got a buddy, one of the chosen, who can do it for you real clean and neat. Then you let their venom work its magic, you’ll suffer unspeakable pain for a few days, and then you’ll be as good as undead. Being a vampire doesn’t really have any drawbacks. You’ll never even think about the days when you were alive. You’ll be faster, stronger, and, hopefully, smarter. The best part is that when that vampire comes looking for the pure girl, all he’ll find is a vampire sucking on a deer carcass. I thought of this plan all on my own.”

Even the sight of Max’s muscles couldn’t cheer me now. Everything seemed horrible and wrong. Every option seemed as bad as the choice between living with my mother or my father. Max and Thomas seemed completely convinced that this older vampire was real. Should I just ignore them both?

My mind was made up for me before I could decide.

A black flash sent the truck spinning around, rolling off the road, and slamming into the dull green trees.

Chapter Six

The first thing I felt was my ankle snap. It wasn't painful. Like opening a can of Coke, it just popped out of place. Then jagged metal and glass pierced my skin.

Max slumped over the steering wheel, mumbling something about a pet rabbit. I was left to wonder what had flashed across the road until I heard a deep, sinister, mocking laughter.

Something picked up the truck and tossed it into another tree. I heard Max grunt as spikes of lumber, glass, and metal rained on us. The laughter grew louder, and I turned away from Max's broken body to stare at the most horrifying creature I'd ever seen.

He was tall, perhaps eight feet tall, wearing a long black robe, and his bald head was the palest white I'd ever seen. His eyes were black and his jaw stuck out—revealing spiked teeth. He craned his neck forward, as if he couldn't wait to dig his fangs into me and suck the life out of me forever.

I tried to think about my options. Max couldn't protect me. The vampire, at least I supposed he's the one they mentioned, would have me in his grip in a matter of seconds. What could I do? My only option was to kill myself, but I didn't have anything on hand. It was the only way to save the world from an army of maniacal killer zombie vampires and werewolves. I thought of poor Thomas who would never get to find out if he and the rest of the undead could be guaranteed some kind of undead eternal life, even if it seemed kind of the same as what he had now. If it was important to Thomas, it was important to me.

Pulling off my seatbelt while the vampire took one halting step after another, I wrenched my body around and rooted through the back in search of something sharp that could slit my throat. As the vampire drew

near, I sensed a new kind of strength surging into my body, and I used it to reach further and faster into the back seat that I would have thought possible. I only found a snow brush. It didn't even have an ice scraper on the end of it. Of all the useless things—you'd think that brushing off snow and scraping ice would sort of go together. Some marketing genius probably thought he could sell them separately and make a bundle of money. No sooner had I grabbed the snow brush, the vampire ripped the door off and hauled my bloody, broken body out of the truck.

His jaws were menacing, and his hands gripped me so tightly I thought my arms would fall off. My broken ankle began to throb with pain. Pain shot through my nose as I inhaled his rotting stench.

“Do you know why your name is Eva?” he roared at me.

I shook my head. I couldn't remember how to speak. My life was over, and I hadn't even been able to tell Thomas that I loved him, not Max. I thought I could wrench myself free if I really tried, but my stomach felt nauseas.

“It's a symbol, a... metaphor. Your name is symbolic of the choice between good and evil. You stand on the precipice of unleashing heaven or hell onto everyone on this planet. And much like your ancestor Eve, you too will fail. You will fail!”

He laughed.

“I shall relish in this moment and drag it out as much as possible. I have all of eternity to command vampires and werewolves as my zombie slaves. And there's nothing you and your snow brush can do about it. I'll take my time killing you just like every evil villain before me.”

He knew what a snow brush was? I wondered if the ancient, evil vampire was from Canada. That would explain so much.

“I'll bet you thought you were going to escape to Indiana. Maybe hide out in Muncie and watch basketball, right?”

What's with all of the annoying people in my life being obsessed with Muncie?

“Do you know how I'm going to kill you?”

I shook my head again. I noted that you could always spot a vampire because they asked a lot of questions. Not that this information would help me all that much at this point. I would have gone to Muncie in a heartbeat. Anything was better than being held in the air by a massive, evil vampire who was on the brink of killing me.

“I’m going to suck every last drop of blood out of your tender, writhing body. I’ll probably latch on around your neck. Some may say that it’s not original, but I like to kill in the traditional ways. The pain will be excruciating for you as you feel the blood being sucked up from your toes right through your heart. I won’t stop until you’re just a limp pile of skin and bones.”

He opened his mouth and licked his lips, spreading his horrible stench onto me. This was it. He was going in for the kill. I tucked my chin in, trying to hide my neck in vain. His horrid teeth were stained yellow with bits of bone and blood spattered on them. His tongue roved back and forth, as if trying to get comfortable for a pleasant time.

“Have you ever noticed that all vampire stories hinge on some kind of unexpected wild card?”

“Thomas!” I yelled.

“I have a friend who does research. He’s kind of like Giles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He knows how to find things. He can find beauty in this messed up, broken world. And he knows how to put things right.”

“I’ll tear you limp from limp you weak-minded fool!” The ancient vampire yelled. He tossed me toward the truck where I skidded to a stop at the bottom of the smashed tree. Splinters of wood lay all about. One wedged its way into my other leg, causing me to cry out in pain.

Thomas leaned casually against a tree. His glasses were perfect. His hair was neat. His outfit, as impeccable as the day he picked it up at Urban Outfitters. The only part of his outfit was a rather large, bulky copper covered ring. He breathed on it and wiped it on his shirt.

“I’m sorry to see you won’t be my slave little Thomas,” shrieked the ancient vampire. “I’ll have to pick you apart before I drink dear Eva’s

blood. You can't win this time. I'm a hundred times faster and stronger than you."

"That's where you're wrong. See this ring?"

"What's that?"

"That's the game-changer that my friend Ned found for me—though he's insisting that I call him Giles for now since Giles is his hero. You see old fang, this is the ring of Ire Ony."

"That's a myth. There's no such thing."

"Oh, the ring lived up to the hype alright. How do you think I tracked you? I mean, you smell bad enough. I was on your heels the whole time."

"We'll see about that! It's time to end this long drawn out dialogue that is keeping me from killing important people!"

The ancient vampire ran at Thomas in a flash. He smashed into the tree where Thomas was standing, but Thomas moved at an equal speed to a sign by the side of the road for the Sporks Chamber of Commerce.

"If you need to take a break for a little bit, that's fine with me," said Thomas. "I know you're probably all worn out for that long speech with the girl. You solitary vampire types must find it so exhausting to be social."

"Aaaagggghhhh!" screamed the ancient vampire, who tore through the road sign, smashed into another tree, and yet another tree. Thomas kept his distance perfectly—he does everything perfectly. The ring of Ire Ony was the goods.

The ancient vampire stood by the road panting and seething with rage, the rage of untold generations that had focused on one particular moment in time—one chance to fulfill his destiny, only to have it ruined by a nosy vampire with smart glasses. Eva could certainly understand his frustration.

"Fine. I can't kill you, but I can still kill her."

Charging at me, I saw him approaching as a black flash, but he was met by Thomas, another black flash who soared into his path. Thomas collided with him and was tossed aside, crashing into the side of the pickup truck. Stunned and disoriented, Thomas crawled toward me, falling forward on the large chunks of wood that littered the ground.

“Now I shall fulfill my destiny,” said the salivating vampire. “Your friends have failed you. You have failed you. Everyone has failed except for me.”

“Eva, catch!”

Thomas tossed the largest, most pointed chunk of wood at me. I caught it as the vampire lunged forward. I sensed something in me wanting to take action, but I realized that I’d just broken a nail.

“What should I do?” I screamed in horror.

“Kill him just like Buffy!” he replied.

“I never watched Buffy.”

“What?” Thomas’ face fell.

A strong, muscular arm emerged and grabbed the wrist of my hand that was tentatively holding the chunk of wood, driving it into the heart of the vampire as his spiked teeth closed in on my neck. The vampire vanished in a puff of dust.

“Stupid girl,” said Max, who stumbled forward. “Almost got us all killed because you wouldn’t watch Buffy.”

“How could you not watch Buffy?” asked Thomas, a tear streaming down his cheek.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got the complete series at home. I’ll let her borrow it,” Max said as he rolled his truck back onto the road shoulder.

Chapter Seven

“Don’t worry Dad, I’m OK. I was in a little car accident, and I’ll be out of the hospital in no time. I have two hot boys with me who will drive me back.”

Thomas looked on with concern as I explained my situation to my dad. Max walked in shirtless, just the way I liked him.

“Everyone’s fine. It was just a, uh, deer that ran in front of my friend’s truck. Don’t worry. My friend is OK. I think he just lost his shirt, but that’s all.”

Thomas looked at Max and shook his head.

“I’ll be back in school tomorrow. Don’t worry. Really. My friends will take care of me.”

I looked at Thomas as I said those words. I knew that he would take care of me forever—maybe even an eternal, undead kind of forever. I still needed to think about that one.

As I hung up from my dad, Max gave Thomas a nudge. “So, do you feel different?”

“How so?”

“Like your girl just unleashed eternal undead life for all of the vampires and werewolves in the world. Come on, don’t you think something would be different now?”

“We’ll see. I hope so. It’s something that we’ll find out when we get there.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Wherever our undead lives run out and undead eternity begins.”

“I’m glad we killed that horrible vampire,” I said. “But as for the benefits of this undead eternity thing, I’m not seeing it.”

“Of course you don’t,” Thomas said. “You don’t watch Buffy, which is something we need to fix if you’re going to hang out with me.”

“So, you risked your life all for a wild fantasy that may be true?” Max asked.

“No. Not at all. I risked my life to save Eva,” Thomas replied.

“Really?”

My wildest dreams came true after my worst nightmare.

“Of course. I mean, you’re plenty good-looking, so we’ll have plenty of time to make you a person of substance and character.”

Thomas thinks I’m good-looking? It was almost too good to believe. My purpose on this earth had been fulfilled. Well, winning over Thomas and killing that scary vampire thing.

“What I don’t get is, how did Ned know about the ring?” asked Max, who flexed his bicep in front of a mirror in vain.

“Oh, that was funny,” said Thomas with the biggest smile—showing off his amazing teeth. “You’re going to love this one.”

“Me or Max?” I asked.

“Max. You didn’t watch Buffy, so you won’t get it.”

“Oh,” I said, cursing myself for not watching it when I saw the reruns on cable. I was too busy convincing my mom to not send money to help the deposed crown prince of Zaire build a swimming pool for his favorite zebra.

“I ran over to Ned after you two drove off,” Thomas said. “He almost ran for it, but when I called his name, he froze. So I started in on the whole ancient vampire thing, and he knew quite a bit about it. He was a little shaky on the details, but I could tell he’d done his homework. When I mentioned the ring, I told him I knew all about it, but I couldn’t figure out where to find it.”

“Well, it’s obviously going to be in a paranormal hot spot where evil touches this world,” replied Max, scratching his strong, manly jaw.

“Right, so I naturally thought it would be somewhere close to the biology department at the college.”

“Evolution and the devil seem to go hand in hand,” replied Max who began doing arm curls with one of the chairs in the room. “I’d have searched there.”

“Exactly. So I did last week, but nothing. When I asked Ned, he responded with the most obvious answer in the world.”

“Some kind of occult group on campus?” I asked, thinking I’d nailed it.

“No, more obvious than that—the local high school.”

“Oh, the hell mouth from Buffy!” cried Max.

“Exactly!” replied Thomas, who barely stifled a giggle of excitement—the most perfect and beautiful giggle in the world. “I just had to bump off a couple of vampire guards, and there it was. I caught up to you and old vamps in plenty of time—which was good since I needed to get the hang of moving that fast.”

“So Ned saved all of us?” I asked in disbelief.

“Of course he did,” replied Max, who was pounding out push-ups next to my bed. “No other human knows as much about vampires as Ned. The problem is—it’s all based on theory, so some of it is a little loopy. He could stand to meet some real vampires.”

“He met one now,” said Thomas.

“Does he know too much?” asked Max.

“Not yet,” replied Thomas. “But we’ll need to keep an eye on him.”

“It would be a pity if he knew too much.”

“Would you kill him?” I asked Max. “Stop doing those push-ups and answer me!”

“Look Eva, Ned is alright for now,” replied Thomas, who seemed shocked that I was so concerned for Ned. “However, if he uncovers too many secrets about vampires, he could disrupt everything about the world of the undead. And if something gets disrupted, we could have chaos on our hands.”

“Like what?”

“Like older, stronger, angrier vampires or raiding bands of vampires and werewolves that won’t keep you company in the hospital after you

break your ankle,” retorted Max with a sneer. “You have no idea what’s out there.”

“There’s always something bigger, badder, and older to worry about,” said Thomas. “Ned is safe for now, especially if he never finds an audience for *Coffeehouse Vampirology*.”

“That would be a disaster,” said Max with a shiver that sent shockwaves through his carefully sculpted muscles.

“Joining vampires and werewolves really is like being in the mob,” I said, thinking back to my horrid conversation with Ned.

“How so?” asked Thomas, his radiant quizzical face beaming at me.

“The only way out is through death.”

“That’s life sweetheart,” replied Thomas with an ironic grin—I adore his ironic grins. “Now get some sleep. You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow.”

“Bigger than today? I don’t think I’ll survive.”

“You’re living with vampires now,” said Thomas—the most comforting, lovely sight in the world. “You’ll be saying that a lot.”

Chapter Eight

The next evening I was clunking and thumping around my dorm room with my ankle in a thick cast. I struggled to slip into my dress.

It caught the cuts and bruises from yesterday—causing me to cry out in pain. Still, I felt that all of the pain was worth it if that's what it took to be with Thomas. I'd go through a thousand yesterdays if I could only have him for one today.

Imagining him in a slick, tight suit, I felt joy bubbling up inside of me. I wanted to hop around and clap, but a thick cut on one hand and my bum ankle made that impossible.

When we returned from the hospital, Thomas had promised a romantic evening. At first I thought that I should just keep a low profile, but then I thought of being in the same room with Hoosier—who would pepper me with endless questions and coo over me with her horrid Midwestern courtesy. I decided that a night out with the perfect man, or vampire—that is, would be just the thing for a girl like me after an ancient vampire nearly sucked me dry of blood.

“You look stunning!” Thomas said as he walked into my room. “Have you ever seen someone so beautiful, so perfect that you didn't know what to say next?”

I doubted Thomas ever had that problem, but he knew me inside out. I certainly found myself speechless when I looked at his soft, glowing smile. He wore a slick black suit that was tailored to fit him perfectly—of course—everything was perfect with Thomas. The only splash of color was a wine-colored tie that bulged beneath his neck. I reached out for him and he practically floated into my arms.

I kissed him tenderly—as if it was the last time I would ever kiss him—which is sort of the right mentality when you’re dealing with vampires—I think.

“Thomas, tell me that it will always be like this.”

“That you’ll always be falling in love with me?”

“Something like that,” I said, staring into his eyes. “Our love is so fresh and new. I don’t want it to go stale. I don’t want us to become like my parents.”

“I can guarantee that will never happen, but love is like planting a tree. I can wheel one out for you if you’d like me to illustrate this. I can grab a shovel in a jiffy.”

“Just tell me what you mean.”

He shifted from foot to foot with his arms wrapped loosely around me. His eyes ranged around the room. I could tell he wanted to illustrate what he was about to share.

“Oh, there’s some paper in my printer if you need to draw something, OK?”

“Thanks!” he said, eager to grasp the lifeline.

“You see, love is like seed or a sapling you plant in the ground. And it’s exciting, and you water it, and you watch its progress. Everything is exciting and new.”

He sketched a little sapling sprouting out of the ground.

“But then your love or tree, begins to grow, it digs roots into the ground. It grows tall and deep. It’s still the same tree, but over time you don’t have all of the new stuff, but it’s stable, steady, and beautiful.”

He continued to draw something, but I decided to just watch his lips instead. I could watch his lips chatter all night.

“That’s beautiful Thomas. But I want everything to always be like this. Can you promise me?”

His eyes widened for a moment.

“Oh, I was coming to that. Of course. I mean, I would never leave you.”

My heart broke at the thought that he thought I thought I could have thought about leaving him so thoughtlessly. He saw the frown on my face.

“It’s not your fault. You’re human. Now, if you became a vampire, you’d be guaranteed life with me forever with the rest of the undead. We’ll all be together forever.”

I thought of a bite to my neck, feeling my body go cold, and drinking blood. My heart began to race. It was terrifying. I could do anything for Thomas—so I thought—but could I become a vampire? I needed time to think that over. Perhaps one lifetime would be enough, provided Thomas remained perfect and beautiful forever.

“But you’re not sure about the guarantee of being eternally undead, right?” I don’t know why I decided to pester him about details like this. Perhaps I just didn’t want to say no to his captivating smile. “I mean, you and Max have no idea what the future holds for the undead, even if you both seem pretty certain about your theories.”

“Listen,” Thomas said with a serious look that almost stopped my heart. “I only know one thing about the future, Eva.” He took a step toward me. What was he going to do? I still wasn’t used to him being a vampire—as in, the kind that could become incredibly murderous at any time. Still, he was pretty hot, even if he was about to kill me.

“All I know is that we are going to have a great time tonight.”

I thought of about five or six ways tonight could turn out horrible, but then he kissed me before I could think of another dozen.

He led me down to a limousine that was waiting. I was happy to see that Thomas understood the kind of treatment I expect.

The limousine took us to the top of a hill just outside of campus, and we watched what we could of the sunset. It was cloaked somewhere in the ever-present gray canopy that glowed with shades of red, orange, and purple. As the sun crept below the horizon, the sky took on a gentle blue glow in the twilight.

“I’ve always thought that twilight is the most beautiful time of day,” I said. “The day is laying itself down to rest. All is well in the world. The sun isn’t blazing. The dark isn’t menacing. It’s just the perfect glow, reminding me of life, of possibilities, of rest. I think we should come up here every night for the rest of our lives.”

“For what?” Thomas asked.

“The twilight. Weren’t you listening to me?”

“Well, it’s sort of just a sunset. I think you’ve read too many sentimental novels. Speaking of what you need, we need to start educating you in the world of Buffy.”

I felt neglected for a moment, but then Thomas looked in my general direction, and I decided that I should just listen to him since he was perfect.

“Now, if you were up on your Buffy, you’d know that she always goes to some big party, event, or dance, and a vampire always shows up at the dance to attack some stupid female who can’t see it coming.”

“What happens?”

“She saves the day. I mean, she’s brilliant. Even though she’s wearing a dress and high heels, she gets down to business, busts a table apart for a stake, and runs it through the vampire’s heart.”

“Sounds exciting.”

I thought it sounded like the most boring, derivative, unoriginal television show in all of history. I wondered if I could just kill another ancient vampire so that we could call it even.

“Speaking of a dance, are you ready?”

“For a dance?”

“You’ll see.”

He led me into the limousine.

“Thomas, I’m in no shape to dance. I’m cut up and in a cast. I don’t want to show up at this dance with bandages all over me and a cast. They’ll think I’m a freak.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m the freak. I’m the vampire. You do remember that I’m a vampire, right?”

I buried my head in my hands and fought back tears.

“Why do you hate me? Why are you trying to make me suffer?”

“Eva, my love, I want the whole world to know how I feel about you. I want to twirl you on the dance floor at the freshman dance. I want you to rely on me to make this the most amazing, life-changing evening of your entire life. This is what humans do, so if you don’t want to be a human, just say so.”

“I’m not worried about whether or not I’m a human,” I pouted. “I’m worried about me. Look at me. I’m lame. I’m literally lame. You should just drag me out to the pasture and shoot me.”

“This may not be the time to say this, but you would heal a lot faster if you were a vampire.”

He flexed his arms by way of demonstrating his health.

“I’m not becoming a vampire tonight.”

“Oh,” he said.

“I don’t want to dance.”

“Let me carry you. I’ll spin you through the air in ways that you’ll never touch the ground. It will be like you’re flying. Trust me Eva. You’ll need to learn to depend on me. Heaven knows you aren’t going to last long on your own. I can take care of you.”

I looked into his sincere, angelic, pleading eyes.

“Of course I’ll trust you. Even though I don’t want to dance, I’ll trust you to make me happy.”

“Good. You won’t regret this.”

Chapter Nine

Thomas was true to his word. I never would have believed that someone could dance on a broken ankle the day after breaking it, but he somehow managed to twist and twirl me without causing any pain. I didn't know much about dancing, but I let Thomas take control and he moved me to the left, to the right, and then around him with his incredible undead strength.

As Thomas spun me around the dance floor I noticed that our school mascot, a black eagle that had seen better days, kept edging closer and closer to us. He had a cup of tea in one of his wings, but with the mascot head on, he couldn't sip it.

Of course other people stared at me. Or perhaps they were staring at Thomas. I decided I should just hate everyone there just in case. I don't like competition.

After dancing for what seemed like an eternity, we walked over to the punch bowl. The black eagle followed us at a safe distance.

"Thomas, did you notice that black eagle is following us around?"

"The mascot? He's just hanging out. I wouldn't worry about him."

"All of the girls are staring at you."

"And I'll bet all of the guys are checking you out," he said with his captivating smile.

I didn't believe him. My body was covered in bandages, my hair fell straight and lifeless, and my dress—a bright and cheerful yellow—didn't fit in with the somber blacks and grays favored by the local Michigan girls at the dance.

Thomas sipped red punch, and I noticed a trace of red juice on his lips. I thought about him tearing his teeth into a deer or a rabbit in the woods—licking the blood off his lips. Those are the lips I plan to kiss for

the rest of my life. Clearly Max had overlooked some drawbacks to being a vampire. Besides all of the blood on my lips, I'd have to floss animal carcass out of my teeth and run the risk of splattering blood on my outfits.

"Look at how Max is cutting it up on the floor out there!" Thomas pointed at Max who danced with an athletic blond. She was thin, but clearly had some muscle tone. I could see what Max saw in her. I just hoped that Thomas didn't see it.

"What are we going to do tomorrow?" I asked Thomas, hoping to distract him from the blond.

"Well, I believe you have classes. I looked through your mail today, and it seems you have biology at 9 am. We could meet for breakfast at 8:15 before class."

"I'll wait up all night for you," I said as I wrapped my arms around him.

"Or you could set an alarm clock," he said with a smile.

A grunt from behind us caught my attention, but Thomas was busy watching some kid fail at break dancing. I looked back and saw the black eagle fumbling with a straw in his tea. He tried to insert it into his beak, but he couldn't figure it out. Tilting his head, he made progress with the straw until a gang of boys charged at him and started pulling feathers from him. His tea spilled onto the floor, and the straw stuck sideways out of his mouth like a sad, thin cigarette. The boys were yanking out quite a few feathers, as he thrashed about, but he finally broke free and ran toward the bathroom, bumping into couples and tripping over his wide bird feet. He hid inside the bathroom for a minute while the gang of boys moved over to the front of the stage to hang out in front of the DJ—as if they owned the place.

A slow song came on, and Thomas looked at me. I'd lost interest in the Black Eagle who made his way to the other end of the refreshment table for another drink. His straw was still in position.

Thomas looked at me, and I knew what Thomas was saying to me with his eyes. He was panting, almost pulsing with passion. He moved his arms around my waist, and I knew he would never let go—ever.

He practically carried me onto the dance floor, and I fell into his tender embrace. His breath heaved onto my neck cold and heavy. I knew what it meant—love. He truly loved me.

I didn't know if he would actually dance with me for the last slow song of the night, but as he clung to me, I had no doubt about his affection. I still had my doubts about this whole vampire business. It creeped me out. But then again, maybe I just needed to get used to it. I mean, no one learns to ride a bike in one go. You need training wheels, and then you work your way up to a regular bike. Maybe Thomas needed to be my training wheels until I was ready for the plunge. Maybe he could illustrate that lesson for me.

The black eagle moved closer to us—almost too close. In a few seconds he was practically next to us with his punch in one hand and that silly straw sticking out of his beak. I don't know what dances are like in other schools, but I didn't quite understand why we needed a mascot at our dances at Stoker College.

Thomas interrupted my thoughts with his breathing that became deeper and heavier, as if he was trying to force something out of himself.

“Do you want to sit down?” I asked. “You’ve done quite a bit of dancing tonight.”

I smiled and bumped my nose against his glasses, nudging them further up his nose.

“Oh no, I’m fine,” he said, forcing a grin that showed his teeth. “I’m just, so, so, in love with you Eva.” He pressed himself closer to me.

It was true love. He’d said it! My heart sang with unspeakable joy. Thomas loved me. Maybe I could bring myself to become a vampire. Maybe his love was enough. Maybe I didn't have to worry about sucking up animal blood. I'd get used to it. I mean, I got used to my mom's new boyfriend.

Thomas panted on my neck in cold bursts.

Something black moved behind Thomas.

I heard Thomas breathing heavy, gasping now. He nestled his face on my shoulder and moved his lips onto my neck in a tender kiss. It was heavenly.

He continued to kiss my neck passionately. The black eagle continued to stand by. That eagle was such an idiot. He was probably watching us because he couldn't find a girl of his own. How pathetic. I was light-years ahead of him—so far ahead that he'd never catch up to me. I had the most beautiful boy in the world kissing my neck.

At that moment his kisses changed. I began to feel his teeth scraping against my flesh. My heart pounded. Thomas gripped me tighter and held me even closer than I would have thought possible.

A low, deep growl came from Thomas.

The black eagle jumped onto us with his wings spread, knocking us to the floor. I screamed in shock, horror, and shocked horror.

Somehow the eagle untangled me from Thomas, and the two of them tussled on the floor.

“Hey! Hey!” Thomas yelled. “I was just kissing my girlfriend. What gives? Hey!”

The black eagle put up a valiant fight, clinging to Thomas with heroic tenacity. Thomas regained his footing while the eagle struggled with his large eagle mascot feet were tangled on top of each other. This gave Thomas the opportunity to sock him in the head, sending the mascot's head flying off and the mascot tumbling down onto my broken ankle. I screamed again as my whole leg burst into throbbing pain. This time the music cut off and a crowd gathered around us.

When the bird scrambled to his feet, he stood between me and Thomas—I saw that the headless bird now had the head of a man jutting out of his costume. His hair was wild and pointing in every possible direction. He held up his wings at Thomas, as if daring him to take one more step.

“You were about to kill her, weren't you?” he asked Thomas. H sounded familiar. The man in the mascot outfit glanced back at me.

It was Ned Ciwinski.

I marveled that Ned somehow managed to make even our school mascot look like a loser. Still, he may have just saved my life if Thomas was about to fall off the wagon—for human blood that is. I hoped and prayed that it was all just a misunderstanding.

“I wouldn’t kill her. I want her to live forever with me,” Thomas said.

Good point.

“But you growled while your teeth were on her neck, poised to strike.”

“Sounds like a vampire to me,” said the blond, athletic girl who stood next to Max.

“Yes! Exactly. Thank you! Thank you!” said Ned with satisfaction.

“He is a vampire, and vampires bite people and kill them.”

“Look, this is all a big misunderstanding,” Thomas said, panting heavy again.

“You need to get away from this girl before you harm her.”

“I’ll let her decide.”

“Thomas, you need to leave this place once and for all. I’ve watched you prey on too many students at Stoker College. I have my evidence. I thank you for the help you have provided for my publishing career, but now I must bid you farewell.”

Thomas laughed deep and hard. He almost sounded like the ancient vampire.

“The girl is mine, and you have nothing more to say about the matter.”

“I’m done talking too. I’m standing here until you leave.”

“Have you ever wanted to give a story a dramatic ending?”

“No. I write nonfiction.”

“Exactly,” said Thomas. “You wouldn’t understand then. I just wanted to end this evening, this little story about humans and vampires with some dramatic flair. I wanted to sow a little bit of doubt in Eva’s mind. But now, you’ve left me with no choice.”

Thomas flashed forward and threw Ned ten feet into the air across the gym. I held my hand to my mouth as Ned bounced off the bleachers and

fell to the floor with a thud. Thomas watched his trajectory and laughed as he admired his work.

While he observed Ned's struggles to drag himself out of the gym, Thomas didn't see the athletic blond girl with Max running at him. She flipped herself in the air and landed a jump-kick into Thomas who tumbled onto the ground.

"I'll show you a dramatic ending, vamp!" she sneered as she pinned him to the ground. "You thought you'd end your little vampire story with your teeth on the neck of some unsuspecting girl?"

Thomas gasped for air as she reached into her purse. His eyes grew wide with fear.

"This is how you end a vampire story!" she shouted as she drove a stake into Thomas.

He disappeared into a cloud of perfectly beautiful dust that sparkled and hovered in the air. His glasses rattled onto the gym floor.

"Huh!" Max said. "Guaranteed undead eternity, eh? Like fun."

If you enjoyed this book, please consider:

- **Tweeting:** "Farewell @edcyzewski! #LoveBites <http://inamirrordimly.com/love-bites>."
- **Posting to Facebook:** "Farewell @Ed Cyzewski! Love Bites: <http://inamirrordimly.com/love-bites>."
- **Visiting** <http://inamirrordimly.com/love-bites> in order to download *Love Bites* for \$2.99. Every little bit helps!
- **E-mailing** Ed at edcyzewski@gmail.com so that you can learn when the Love Bites special edition is coming out with a discussion guide, a sample chapter from *Coffeehouse Vampirology*, and an exclusive interview with Ned Ciwinski.

About the Author

Ed Cyzewski (B.A. Taylor University, MDiv Biblical Theological Seminary) is the author most recently of *A Path to Publishing: What I Learned by Publishing a Nonfiction Book*, as well as *Coffeehouse Theology: Reflecting on God in Everyday Life*, *The Coffeehouse Theology Bible Study Guide*, and *The Coffeehouse Theology Contemporary Issues Guide*.

He has contributed to *The Southshire Pepper-Pot* short story collection, *Baptimergent: Baptist Stories from the Emergent Frontier*, *Holy Bible: Mosaic NLT*, and several magazines and web sites. He speaks on writing, publishing, marketing, and theology at various venues and workshops throughout the northeastern U.S.

You can find out more about his books, writing tips, and writing workshops at www.edcyz.com and by subscribing to his monthly newsletter for writers. To book Ed to speak at your publishing workshop or writing group, you can contact him at edcyzewski@gmail.com. He blogs on theology and culture at www.inamirrordimly.com.

Ed lives in eastern Connecticut with his wife Julie and a gang of furniture-munching house rabbits.

Coming in the Summer of 2011

Love Bites in Paperback with these bonus features...

A Love Bites Book Group Reading Guide

A Sample Chapter from Ned Ciwinski's *Coffeehouse Vampirology*

An Exclusive Interview with Ned Ciwinski

Ed's other books and freelance writing services are listed at www.edcyz.com.