



# The Blood Moon Rising (A Cauldron Falls Mystery #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Some vampires want to drain your blood. This one wants to drain your property values.

Meet Ronald Bitterhump: spray tanned vampire, failed resort developer, and owner of the worlds most tragic comb-over. His dream? Transform sleepy Cauldron Falls into Fangtasia Falls—a luxury vampire spa where the undead can get facials and work on their tans. (Yes, really.)

His secret weapon? Tandy Keyes, a magically-challenged realtor who couldnt light a candle with a flamethrower but can spot a commission opportunity from three counties away. Armed with business cards reading Vampire Real Estate Queen and a vision board covered in glitter, Tandy's ready to sell out her entire town for a corner office and eternal commission rights.

Standing in their way: Honey Hadwin and her long-lost sister Maisie (plus Bartie, a sarcastic British bat with strong opinions about Ronalds fashion choices), one very competent detective, and Vlad Marcum—a vampire hunter who talks like a theme park pirate and carries enough stakes to build a fence.

When the blood moon rises and Ronald arrives with his coven of discount vampires, hes about to discover that magical water doesnt appreciate being turned into a spa treatment—and that nothing ruins an evil scheme quite like a really, really bad hair day.

Featuring: vampire spray tan disasters, weaponized real estate enthusiasm, and the most embarrassing supernatural invasion in magical history.

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

## Cauldron Falls

The crest of the most secluded waterfall in the world cascades over a rocky ledge into a round pool below.

It's crystal blue water bubbles with a white foam where the two bodies of water crash together.

As the plunge pool spreads out into its round bowl-like shape, the water stills and spills towards a series of stair-stepping rocks that go on for a mile, or so, until the creek bed sinks into the earth, and calms the ripples of the falls.

That's where the town begins; at the quiet crook of the creek.

There the water inches along its banks and follows the goings-on of a place known only to its inhabitants as Cauldron Falls.

To visit Cauldron Falls one just has to find the waterfall, and cauldron-shaped crystal blue pool, then follow the rippling creek southward, traveling between the towering hills that hide it from the rest of the world.

But alas, the waterfall is buried deep in the most treacherous, hard to reach, uninhabitable part of the Appalachian Mountains.

No normal human would dare attempt to find it, if they knew it existed, much less try to live there.

Of course, Cauldron Falls wasn't settled by humans.

There in this shadowy place carved out by the rushing waters of a waterfall, lives a band of witches and warlocks, descendants of escapees from Transylvania, who ran from the ruling grasp of the wretched Vampires that control all the lands surrounding the Black Sea.

While their liberation was centuries ago, the fear of the pale-skinned, sharp-fanged predator keeps Cauldron Falls residents content to exist in their safe and secret bubble, insulated from the rest of the world.

But as progress will do, Cauldron Falls is not truly and completely cut-off.

The quaint town blossomed into a booming business many, many years ago.

And is now the main manufacturer and supplier of magical goods to the world.

They are the broom makers, crystal miners, herb growers, potions masters, wand turners, and book binders of all things magical, especially witchy things.

Keeping the old traditions alive, every truly magical implement in the world is made in Cauldron Falls in the same manner as they were in the old country.

Being keepers of the craft and all its secrets, is the blessing and curse of the witches and warlocks who live in this town.

Their fate comes with great pressure and power, which each of the residents of Cauldron Falls takes very seriously, and protect with their very lives.

However, like the uncontrollable consequences of a waterfall on the very environment that makes it beautiful, it's hard to see the erosion happening just under

the surface of something so perfect.

While most of the residents of Cauldron Falls will continue forever to go about their business, keeping the crafts and all its glory alive, there is something not so right creeping through the night and into the forest around the falls.

Born from the power, the perfection, the isolation, and the secrets that dwell in every home hidden deep in the mountains, an evil is growing.

Where will it strike? What will it do? Who will it take?

One might never know these answers without making the trek to the most magical, mysterious, and now murderous place on earth. Welcome to Cauldron Falls.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Prologue: What Happened Before?

Under the glow of a luminous full moon, two tiny figures with fiery red curls dashed breathlessly between towering, moss-draped trees in the dense Appalachian Forest. Little Martha, despite being only slightly older, gripped her sister Maisie's hand protectively as they ran along the rugged, leaf-strewn path.

"Come on, Bunny!" Martha urged, her voice steady despite her fear as she pulled her smaller sister forward. "Keep running!"

Around their necks, identical silver pendants swung wildly—simple chains holding small rectangular bars engraved with "Martha" and "Maisie," each letter catching the moonlight.

"Scared, Honey," Maisie whimpered, clutching a battered stuffed rabbit to her chest.

Martha, gripping a worn stuffed bear, wrapped her free arm around her sister. "We find water," she declared with determination beyond her years. "We be safe there."

A sharp crunching noise echoed behind them. Both girls froze before Martha grabbed Maisie's hand again, pulling her forward as their small feet pounded against the forest floor.

Hidden in the shadows of a gnarled oak, a pale figure observed their flight. Ronald—not yet the spray tanned caricature he would become, but already calculating and cruel—wore an elaborate velvet cape. His cold eyes followed the children with predatory interest.

"Let them run," he murmured. "The little witch twins will lead us right to it."

High above, Bartholomew the bat—Bartie—watched with growing unease.

His sleek black fur and refined British accent set him apart as he whispered, "Oh dear, this is becoming rather unsavory."

"He had been following Ronald as part of his vampire surveillance duties, but something about this felt... wrong."

When the girls burst into a clearing, three vampires materialized from the gloom, blocking their path to the distant sound of rushing water.

"Well, well," hissed one vampire, revealing glistening fangs. "What have we here?"

Martha immediately shoved Maisie behind her small but fierce frame. "Run, Bunny!" she commanded, trying to shield her sister as she looked for an escape route.

In the ensuing chaos, one vampire lunged forward. Martha threw herself at him, her stuffed bear flying from her grasp as she fought to protect Maisie. "RUN!" she screamed with all her might.

But as Maisie turned to flee, another vampire snatched her up, his cold hands silencing her terrified cries.

"I did it. I got the one. This one. This is all we need," Ronald grinned, pointing dramatically at the captured Maisie.

"Put that one down," he commanded sharply, gesturing at Martha.

He looked at the underling who had moved toward the other girl in disgust. "What are

you doing with that child?

I said we only need one! Do you think I'm running some sort of orphanage?

One witch, one victory, one Ronald being tremendously successful! "

The other vampire dropped Martha.

"NO! BUNNY!" Martha shrieked, launching herself toward her captured sister, but a third vampire blocked her path.

Ronald dramatically pulled a small pouch from his cape with a theatrical flourish, holding it aloft like a prized trophy.

"This should make things... cleaner," he declared with smug satisfaction, his voice dripping with self-congratulation.

"Behold! Ronald's proprietary memory modification powder!

Patent pending!" He threw a handful of glittering dust into the air with the grandiose gesture of a magician completing his greatest trick.

"I really am tremendously brilliant at this villain business! "

The sparkling powder settled over both girls like a malevolent snow. Martha's desperate struggles slowed as confusion clouded her eyes. Maisie went limp in the vampire's arms, her memories beginning to dissolve like morning mist.

"The dust will ensure they forget each other completely," Ronald announced proudly to his minions. "The one we're taking won't remember her sister, and the one left behind won't remember being a twin. No witnesses, no leads, no competition! I really

am tremendously clever."

As the magical dust worked its cruel magic, Martha collapsed to the forest floor, her mind emptying of everything except a strange, inexplicable ache and the fading echo of a word: "Bunny."

From his perch high above, Bartie watched in horror. Something twisted in his chest—a feeling he'd never experienced before. This wasn't vampire business or surveillance duty. This was... wrong. Terribly, horribly wrong.

"Good Lord," he whispered to himself, his refined accent trembling with newfound resolve.

"I can't simply observe this atrocity. That poor child.

.." He looked at the unconscious Maisie being carried away.

"Right then. I suppose this is the moment I discover whether I'm truly just a vampire's lackey, or if there's a hero buried somewhere in this furry exterior. "

With that declaration, Bartie silently swooped after the departing vampires, no longer a mere observer but a determined protector-in-waiting.

From the edge of the clearing, Leahnora Loveridge emerged, drawn by the disturbance. She found Martha lying unconscious among the fallen leaves, the stuffed rabbit that had been Maisie's clutched in her small arms alongside her own bear.

"Oh, little one," Leahnora whispered, gathering the child gently. She could sense the residual magic of the forgetting dust, the cruel emptiness where memories of a beloved sister should be. "Let's find you a safe home."



She carried Martha toward Cauldron Falls, toward the Victorian house where Rhoda and Edgar Hadwin awaited. In time, they would know her simply as "Honey"—never knowing she had once been half of a whole.

High above, the promise of a future blood moon lingered—a harbinger that one day, the separated twins might find each other again.

Until then, their paths would diverge: one sheltered in Cauldron Falls' heart, the other held captive by vampires, both carrying only the faintest echo of what they had lost.

The forgetting dust had done its work, and the long journey toward reunion had begun.

As before, the iron gates creaked open on their own as Honey approached the imposing estate alone. Leahnora met her at the door, an inscrutable smile playing about her blood-red lips.

"Glad to have you back, my dear? To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Honey stood tall, resolved to not be intimidated by Leahnora's mere presence. "I believe we have more to talk about."

Leahnora arched a brow. "Come in." She glided silently down the hall, beckoning for Honey to follow. Apprehension prickled across Honey's skin, but she complied, determined to uncover the unknown.

At last, they reached the candlelit chamber again. Leahnora turned, her eyes flashing.

"There are always secrets in Cauldron Falls. We all know that," she whispered. "Dark secrets beneath our glittering facades. You've yet to stumble upon your own secret."

Honey's pulse quickened. "What do you mean, my own secret?"

Leahnora hesitated. "I really shouldn't speak of such things. But perhaps you are ready for the truth..."

Confusion flooded Honey. "What do you mean? What truth?"

Leahnora's gaze bore into hers. "As you know, I was once a renowned fortune teller, known as a gazer to some, before I turned against the knowing. It was too painful to always see what was coming. I've struggled for years to keep my visions at bay.

But one night last year, unbidden, a vision came to me. A memory, one might say."

She took Honey's hands, her expression gentle yet grave.

"In this vision, I saw that you came to us here, as a tiny soul, lost and scared.

But you were not alone. A sister held your hand as you were running through the woods.

A tight grip, until a trip over a stone, and a scuffle, where you lost all but her small stuffed bunny.

There your lives were separated. You found your way here to our enchanted corner of the world.

Our Cauldron Falls. But somewhere, out there in the world, there is a part of you, a sister from birth whom you must find and bring back to Cauldron Falls. "

Honey's breath caught, shock rooting her to the spot. "A sister? How was that possible?"

Leahnora gave her hands a reassuring squeeze. "I tell you this now because you are ready to know, and she needs you. She is seeking you out."

Overwhelmed, Honey's heart rose in her chest. All her life, she had felt there was some part of herself missing. She had kept that to herself, buried deep under her skin.

Leahnora glided to an ancient chest, producing a scroll tied with a silk ribbon. "This scroll will help you in this quest. You will need many tools and much protection."

With a racing heart, Honey accepted the scroll. "But what do I do next?"

Leahnora turned, her eyes glinting in the firelight. "There is more you must know before you decide what is next."

"Okay." Honey urged breathlessly.

Leahnora met her gaze. "In my visions now, your sister is surrounded by bats. Vampire bats."

Honey reeled back in shock. "What? How can that be? Vampire bats can be deadly."

"I am afraid it is true," Leahnora whispered. "I cannot say if she dwells in a realm of darkness, perhaps even turned to a creature of the night herself."

Thoughts swirling, Honey spun toward the door. A sister consumed by evil? It seemed impossible. "Why did you tell me this?"

"Because she's coming to find you and that means she coming to Cauldron Falls."

You're not the only one who lives with the sting of separation and loss.

She too has struggled with never quite feeling a part of the world she inhabits.

She is restless. Or you could find her first. You must know this now, while you can get ahead of it. ”

Honey clutched at her own chest, dismayed by the truth in Leahnora’s words. “You could have told me this a year ago.”

“Yes. I could have. But would you have accepted it? Leahnora gathered Honey’s hands in her own. “You know now. Look for your sister before the darkness consumes you both. But beware... the path is fraught with peril.”

Overwhelmed with fear and sorrow, Honey knew what she had to do. For the sake of her sister’s humanity, and perhaps her own, she would confront vampires or bats, or whatever she had to face to save her sister, herself, and everyone she loved in Cauldron Falls.

Rhoda and Edgar Hadwin stepped through the shimmering transport portal into the FACTS & FIBS Victorian kitchen, weary but pleased after another successful mission rescuing familiars.

They were surprised to find the house empty except for Roam O'Reilly sitting solemnly at the farm table in the center of the room.

"Where is our Honey?" Rhoda asked, immediately concerned something was amiss.

Before Roam could respond, Honey came bursting in the Cadillac swinging door. She froze when she saw her parents, tears springing to her eyes.

"You're back! I'm so glad..." Her voice trailed off as she rushed to embrace them.

"Dear Honey. There, there. What is wrong?" Rhoda asked gently, smoothing Honey's hair.

Honey took a deep breath before responding. "I went to Leahnora to find out the meaning behind her cryptic message to me a year ago, when we were investigating Lily's murder. I just learned I have a sister out there somewhere. I have to find her before she comes to Cauldron Falls."

Rhoda and Edgar exchanged astounded looks.

"What are you talking about, Honey?" Edgar took his daughter's trembling hand in his.

She told them of Leahnora's mystical revelation. They listened with a mix of shock and knowing.

Rhoda sighed, "I always knew you were looking for someone when you stared out into the distance beyond the woods. Remember Edgar? When she was little, how she'd go to the woods and call for her 'Bunny'?"

Edgar nodded. "I thought you were just playing a game with your dolls. The bunny and bear never left your side when you were small."

"I remember. It's fuzzy, like a black and white movie. But it's there." Honey felt for the necklace around her neck. The one with the silver bar engraved with Martha. "I bet she has one of these, maybe?"

The room fell silent.

"We love you and think you are so brave." Rhoda paused.

"Are you sure this is what you must do?" Edgar finally said, blinking back tears of his own.

Honey nodded firmly. "I've never been more certain. My heart is calling me to find her."

Rhoda cupped Honey's face tenderly. "Then you have our blessing. We are here for you, whatever you need."

Honey clung to them tightly before stepping back and taking Roam's hand. "I'll have Roam with me. We're going to start with the woods, since that is where I lost her."

Watching their daughter start on another perilous quest, Rhoda and Edgar held each other close.

Glancing at her distraught parents, Roam added, "And I give you my oath that no harm will come to your daughter under my watch." He placed a hand over his heart. "You have entrusted me with your greatest treasure. I will protect her with my life."

Fresh tears sprang to Honey's eyes. Impulsively, she threw her arms around the tall shifter. Rhoda and Edgar exchanged an approving look.

Composing herself, Honey stepped back and smiled. "Before we just jump into the wild. I think we should start by examining the scroll that Leahnora gave me, but we're going to need help. Lots of help from our friends."

"I'll make the muffins." Edgar smiled and snapped his fingers, filling the island with pastries.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Dead Man Walking (His Beat)

The full moon illuminated Cauldron Falls Cemetery, showcasing aged tombstones and the shadowy form of Butcher, the zombie caretaker.

Despite being a typical zombie with decaying skin stretched over bones, sunken eyes, and tattered clothes, Butcher took pride in his cemetery, checking each plot and monument.

His nightly rounds, a comforting ritual for decades, involved a slow, careful stroll through the cemetery's winding paths, ensuring the headstones remained upright and occasionally acknowledging the deceased.

Most nights were peacefully silent, occasionally punctuated by an owl's hoot or the rustle of a forest creature.

Having watched over aged tombstones for many years, Butcher was not easily startled.

Countless full moons had cast their ethereal glow on him as he bore witness to a variety of strange happenings, including ghostly figures dancing between graves, shapeshifters morphing into mythical forms, and secretive warlocks chanting near the cemetery.

Rasping an evening greeting to the ornately engraved headstone of Mrs. Mills, he delicately brushed away the scattered leaves with his thin fingers. "Garden club meeting tomorrow. I hear they're discussing night-blooming roses. Right up your

alley."

He carried on with his unhurried stroll, halting by an unassuming gray stone bearing the inscription "Lily McBride, Adored Orchardist and Friend.

" He patted the top of the hard slab of marble.

"Evening, Miss Lily. Moon's waxing, nearly full tonight," Butcher murmured.

"Reminds me of your orchard. I sure do miss you.

" The memory gave him pause. Lily died shortly before the last major event in Cauldron Falls.

The last murder. The thought chilled Butcher with a strange feeling.

He shifted uncomfortably, feeling his decaying skin tingling as if being pricked by countless tiny needles.

Midway through the cemetery, a strange rustling sound disturbed the quiet of the night, emanating from a far corner.

Butcher paused, tilting his head to listen closely.

There was additional rustling, a quiet thump, and then the sound of deep, ragged breathing---almost like sobbing.

This something was far from ordinary. Butcher was familiar enough with the dead to spot the behavior of the living when they entered his domain.

"Hello? Cemetery's closed to the living after sundown," he called out, lumbering



toward the disturbance with more purpose than his usual patrol, his joints softly creaking.

He arrived at the cemetery's oldest part, where the town's founding families lay buried. There, stumbling between the markers, was a figure---a woman with tangled hair and tattered clothes. Moving unsteadily, as if hurt or confused, she weaved a path between the monuments.

As Butcher drew closer, he could see more clearly in the moonlight.

Her clothes weren't just tattered---they were shredded in places, revealing angry red welts and deep scratches along her arms. Dark bruises mottled her exposed skin, some fresh, others yellowed with age.

Her feet were bare and bloodied, leaving faint crimson prints on the cemetery grass.

"Excuse me," Butcher called, approaching cautiously. "The living aren't permitted after dark. Safety regulations." Despite his official-sounding warning, concern colored his tone. Something was wrong; she wasn't your average trespasser.

The woman spun at his voice, her entire body jerking as if struck. Her eyes were wild, darting frantically from shadow to shadow, never settling on any one point. She pressed herself against a tall headstone, her fingers clawing at the marble as if trying to merge with it.

"Please," she whispered hoarsely, her voice raw as if from screaming. "Don't let them...they're coming. They're always coming."

Butcher slowed his approach, noting how she flinched when a cloud passed over the moon, casting moving shadows across the graves. Her whole body trembled, not just from the cold but from something deeper---a bone-deep terror that radiated from her

in waves.

"Who's coming, miss? And who are you?" He kept his voice gentle, the way he might speak to a frightened animal.

The woman's legs gave way suddenly, as if the last of her strength had finally abandoned her. As Butcher moved to catch her, she recoiled, throwing her arms up to protect her face.

"No! Don't---don't---" She scrambled backward on her hands. "The blood moon rises, and they'll follow. They always follow."

That's when Butcher noticed the marks on her neck---deep scratches and bruising, some scarred over, others looking disturbingly fresh. Her wrists bore similar marks, along with what appeared to be rope burns, as if she'd been repeatedly bound.

"Easy now," Butcher said, maintaining his distance. "I'm not here to hurt you. I'm just the caretaker."

She stared at him, really seeing him for the first time. Her gaze traveled over his decaying features, and surprisingly, she seemed to relax slightly. "Dead," she murmured. "You're dead. They can't use the dead."

Before Butcher could respond, a small bat suddenly swooped down from a nearby tree and began circling them frantically.

"Mind your manners with her," the bat advised, his voice crisply British. "She's had a dreadfully long journey."

The woman's reaction to the bat was immediate and visceral. She pressed herself flat against the ground, covering her head with her arms. "No more bats, please, no

more---"

"It's all right!" the bat said quickly, landing a respectful distance away. "I'm not one of them. I helped you escape, remember? Bartholomew? Bartie?"

Slowly, the woman lifted her head, recognition dawning in her exhausted eyes. "Bartie?" she whispered. "You're... you're not like the others."

Butcher wasn't surprised by the talking bat, as familiar creatures were common in Cauldron Falls. However, a bat familiar was unusual. Most witches preferred cats, ravens, or occasionally a toad. And a British bat was considerably more exotic, especially in these parts.

"A British bat," Butcher observed, carefully studying the terrified woman. "The perfect addition to my night."

When the woman struggled to stand, Butcher noticed more details---her fingernails were torn and bloody, as if she'd clawed her way through something.

Her hair wasn't just tangled but matted with what might have been dried blood.

When she moved, she winced, suggesting injuries hidden beneath her torn clothing.

"The blood moon rises, and they'll follow," she repeated, her voice growing fainter. Her hand clutched something at her neck---a silver chain that caught the moonlight. "Have to warn... have to find..."

Her eyes rolled back, and this time, when her legs gave out, she couldn't resist Butcher's help. As he caught her, she mumbled one more thing before losing consciousness, "Blood moon... the water."

Butcher readjusted his grip on the woman, noting how light she felt---too light, as if she hadn't eaten properly in weeks.

Her breathing was shallow but steady, and up close, he could see the full extent of her condition.

Scars crisscrossed her arms in strange patterns, and her skin had an unhealthy pallor beneath the dirt and bruises.

"Looks like the pub is our next stop," he decided, heading for the cemetery gates. The bat familiar fluttered alongside, keeping a watchful eye on his charge.

"Careful with her," Bartie instructed. "She's been through more than you can imagine. Those monsters... what they did to her..." The bat's voice trailed off, unable to finish.

A creeping dread settled in Butcher's creaking bones. Something was coming to their town---something that understood patience and planning. And judging by this woman's warning---and her condition---they didn't have long to prepare.

As he carried her through the cemetery gates, the woman stirred slightly, caught in the grip of some nightmare. "Ronald," she whimpered. "Please, not again. Not the chains..."

Butcher quickened his pace toward The Boozy Cauldron, knowing that whatever horrors this woman had escaped, they were likely following close behind.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Bat Out of Hell (Into a Pub)

"Murphy!" yelled Butcher, entering The Boozy Cauldron just before midnight, the unconscious woman precariously held in his arms. "Got a situation!"

A hush fell over the usually lively pub. The stocky Irish warlock, Murphy O'Reilly, possessing the build of a boxer and intense black eyes, glanced up from the bar he was cleaning. Seeing Butcher carrying a limp stranger in his arms, his thick eyebrows shot up.

"Bloody hell, Butcher," Murphy scolded, hurrying around the bar. His slight Irish lilt became more pronounced with concern. "You can't just bring corpses in here. This isn't a morgue."

From the back room came Uma O'Reilly, Murphy's daughter, her dark eyes narrowing under her black hair. Allen, her tabby familiar, strolled nonchalantly behind her, exuding the confidence of a seasoned observer.

"What's all this commotion, then?" Allen asked, his voice carrying the unexpected accent of a 1940s film noir detective. "A damsel in death, I see."

"Don't worry, she's alive," Butcher said, settling the woman into a booth. "Found her in the cemetery. And she's got a British bat."

Right on cue, the small bat glided through the door and perched protectively on the back of the booth.

"She needs sustenance," Bartie announced in his crisp, haughty British accent. "And perhaps a proper cup of tea, if you Americans can manage such a thing."

"We're Irish, you arse." Uma crossed her arms, smirking. "Allen," she said, "don't let that bat cause any problems."

"Don't worry," Allen replied, his tail swishing. "If Wings there gets uppity, I'll show him how we handle troublemakers."

Murphy leaned over the woman to check her pulse, noticing the scratches on her arms and bruising on her neck. "These look rough. Some healed, some fresh." Murphy looked up at Bartie.

"Not from me! These are from their... methods." Bartie corrected stiffly. "They kept her weakened and scared."

The pub's warmth seemed to rouse the woman. Her eyes fluttered, then snapped open in panic. She jerked upright, immediately pressing herself into the corner of the booth, her hands raised defensively.

"Easy now," Murphy said gently. "You're safe here."

But her wild eyes darted around the pub, taking in the crowd of faces with visible terror. When someone shifted in their chair, she flinched. The sound of glasses clinking made her shoulders hunch up around her ears.

"What kind of bat is he?" Dottie Darwin whispered loudly, as she leaned in for a better look at Bartie.

"I am a fruit bat, thank you very much," Bartie retorted, puffing out his chest. "Though I've kept some... questionable company of late. The name is Bartholomew,

but you may call me Bartie. I'm particular about who uses my diminutive, but given the circumstances, I'll make an exception."

Uma returned with soup and water. "Here, try to eat something."

But as Uma approached with the steaming bowl, the woman shrank back, her breathing becoming rapid and shallow. "No, please... they used to drug the food." Her voice cracked.

"It's safe," Bartie assured her, flying down to land on the table. "I assure you. No tampering. You need strength."

Her hands shook as she reached for the spoon. The first attempt sent soup splattering across the table as tremors wracked her fingers. She froze, expecting punishment or ridicule, her whole body tensing.

"It's alright," Uma said softly, sliding a napkin over. "Take your time."

"Where am I?" she asked hoarsely, her voice worn out from fatigue.

"Cauldron Falls, love," Murphy answered, helping her steady the spoon. "The Boozy Cauldron, to be exact. I'm Murphy O'Reilly."

"Cauldron Falls," she repeated, and for the first time, hope flickered across her face. "I made it. I actually made it." Then her expression crumpled. "He'll find me. He always finds me." She shuddered.

"Who'll find you?" Uma asked.

"Ronald." The name came out like a curse. "He'll be so angry. When vampires don't get their way..." She rubbed her arms where old bruises overlapped new ones.

"Vampires?" several pub patrons murmured the word.

"Someone call Roam," Murphy instructed one of the onlookers. "Tell him we've got a visitor, who might have a case."

"Already texted him," Uma said, keeping a wary eye on the stranger as she hungrily devoured the soup. "He was at FACTS & FIBS with Honey. Should be here soon."

At the mention of Honey's name, the woman's spoon slipped back into the bowl, and she grabbed her chest where a thin silver chain was visible.

"What, precisely, are FACTS & FIBS?" Bartie inquired, trying to distract his ward from her growing distress.

Gloria Pendlebury jumped in enthusiastically. "It's where witches and warlocks go to get paired with their perfect familiar companions. Honey Hadwin runs it while her parents are traveling the world rescuing rogue, and lost familiars."

Minutes later, Roam O'Reilly burst through the pub door, his presence immediately commanding attention. Close behind, Honey Hadwin followed.

"What's the emergency?" Roam asked wrinkling his nose as an acrid scent that didn't belong in the familiar warmth of the pub hit his nostrils.

Murphy gestured toward the woman. "Found in the cemetery by Butcher. Seems a bit... disconnected."

When Honey approached, the woman went absolutely still, like a deer caught in headlights. Her eyes fixed on Honey's face with an intensity that seemed almost painful.



"Hello," Honey said softly. "I'm Honey Hadwin. What brings you to Cauldron Falls?"

"It's you," she breathed, her voice choked with emotion. "All this time... and it's actually you."

Honey's brow creased in confusion. "I'm sorry. Do we know each other?" However, as she inquired, memories began to resurface - sprinting through shadowy forests, a smaller hand gripping hers tightly, the sound of panicked breaths.

Pulling the necklace free, the woman showed a name engraved on the silver bar - a name she barely remembered, Maisie.

Honey gasped, her hand immediately going to her neck where a matching necklace was concealed under her shirt. Her trembling fingers drew it out, showing the inscription Martha on the silver.

"Bunny?" Honey whispered, using the pet name that suddenly flooded back.

"Honey," the woman whispered back, tears filling her eyes.

Memories flooded back, shattering the magical barriers that had held them captive. Running together as children. The terrified breathing. The voice of a woman telling them to run, to never look back.

Honey's voice broke, tears streaming down her face. "You're my sister?"

Moving to protect Honey, Roam approached as she rushed forward, embracing the woman tightly and causing the bat to stumble.

"I never thought I'd find you," Honey sobbed, holding her long-lost sister. "We've looked everywhere. For a year, ever since Leahnora told me... I'd almost given up."

The patrons of The Boozy Cauldron watched in stunned silence. Even Allen had stopped his vigilant watch of Bartie, his feline eyes wide with surprise. "Talk about a family reunion," he muttered to Uma, who shushed him.

Maisie returned the embrace weakly, her own tears falling. "I came to warn you," she said, her voice muffled against Honey's shoulder. "I had to escape so I could find you."

Honey pulled back, concern replacing the joy on her face. "Who did you escape from? What are you talking about?"

"Vampires," her sister declared, her voice suddenly firmer, imbued with urgency. "Led by Ronald."

A ripple of nervous laughter spread through the pub. A cackle erupted from Tandy Keyes seated in the back.

"Ronald?" Murphy questioned dubiously. "Funny name for a bloodsucker."

"The name is misleading," Bartie said, smoothing his feathers and returning to his perch on Maisie's shoulder.

"Ronald is not your typical vampire. He is ridiculously comical with his orange skin, atrocious comb-over, and habit of referring to himself in the third person.

Yet, beneath the farce lies a dangerous, single-minded obsession. "

The laughter in the pub quieted as Bartie carried on, his small bat characteristics managing to show profound worry.

"He may present himself as a buffoon with a spray tan but make no mistake. Ronald

has left a trail of drained bodies across three states. He commands a coven of devoted followers who obey his every whim, no matter how outlandish. And he is fixated on Cauldron Falls."

Maisie nodded earnestly. "It's true. He has horrible taste in fashion, too. He thinks the tan helps him blend in with other kinds of creatures. But the other vampires hate it. And he's coming to take over Cauldron Falls and use the water."

"Wait, wait, wait," Gloria interrupted, stepping forward. "Are you saying we're about to be invaded by a tanning-bed vampire with bad hair?"

"Precisely," Bartie confirmed gravely. "His appearance might draw mockery, but his ambitions are undeniably serious."

Although more laughter spread through the pub, the woman's expression didn't change. Her fingers clenched the edge of the table.

"He wants Cauldron Falls," she continued, holding Honey's gaze. "The magic here---especially the water from the falls---it has a calling. The water protects and enhances those who freely claim it. Ronald plans to take the water and turn Cauldron Falls into a resort for vampires."

"A resort?" Dottie questioned, "Like with vampire concierges and blood cocktails by the pool?"

"Exactly," she nodded, relief flooding her face as someone seemed to understand. "He calls it 'Fangtasia Falls'---a luxury destination where vampires can bathe in the magical waters and temporarily overcome their vulnerability to sunlight, garlic, and all that stuff."

Doubtful glances passed between Roam and Murphy. Honey, however, was wholly

absorbed by her sister's frightened eyes. "How did you escape?" she asked softly.

## Page 5

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"I don't remember everything," Maisie admitted, pressing a hand to her temple. "They did something to my mind. But I know I was their prisoner for as long as I can remember. Bartie helped me escape." She gestured to the bat, who bowed dramatically.

"Pleasure to formally make your acquaintance," Bartie said.

"My name is Bartholomew Wingrove Flittington III---though you can call me Bartie.

" He fluttered his wings importantly. "I was tasked with monitoring her, but I found I couldn't stomach Ronald's treatment of her.

Or his fashion sense, frankly. So, when he was distracted by his weekly fashion runway show---dreadful affair, really, all those sequins---I helped her slip away. "

"A fashion runway show?" Uma asked.

"Oh yes," Bartie sighed. "Every Wednesday night, Ronald forces his coven to sit through his 'Eternal Fashion Collection.

' Picture, if you will, a middle-aged vampire the color of pumpkin puree, modeling increasingly gaudy outfits while proclaiming himself a 'fashion genius.

' The horror of it all nearly turned me to stone. "

Listening nearby, Gloria cleared her throat. "As fascinating as the clothing choices of this 'Ronald' may be, shouldn't we be more concerned about the, um, vampire

invasion?"

"If there is one," Murphy pointed out. "With all due respect, Miss, this sounds rather---"

"Insane?" Maisie supplied with a bitter smile. "I know how it sounds. But I've spent most of my life as Ronald's prisoner. I've seen what he's capable of. And he's coming. When the blood moon rises."

"Blood moon?" a chorus of voices repeated.

"Yes," Maisie nodded gravely. "Ronald will come with his coven. They're mostly newly turned and stupid, but dangerous in numbers. They'll try to take the town, starting with water from the falls."

With growing concern spreading through the pub, Honey, Roam, Uma, and Murphy huddled to plan. What began as humorous---an orange vampire called Ronald obsessed with fashion---now appeared menacing rather than amusing.

"Sweetheart," Roam whispered, gently grasping Honey's hand, "I'm aware she's probably your sister. However, we must explore every option."

"Probably? She is. And I can guess what's on your mind," Honey answered, keeping her eyes on her sister. "But something's wrong. Everything she's saying---it feels true, even the ridiculous parts. Maybe especially those."

Uma crossed her arms. "I agree with Honey. No one could make up something that absurd unless it was real."

"We should take her to Evangelina Coal," Murphy suggested. "If anyone can verify vampire involvement, it's her."

Maisie turned to address the growing crowd of patrons.

"When the blood moon rises," she announced, her voice carrying surprising authority despite her bedraggled appearance. "Ronald will come with his coven. They are actual vampires and very dangerous. They're coming to take over the town."

Curious townsfolk crowded the pub, and her words instantly provoked a response. Several witches began arguing about protective spells, while others demanded more information.

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" a skeptical warlock called out, his voice cutting through the growing din.

"She's my sister," Honey said firmly, returning to her side. "And we're going to hear her out."

Suddenly the pub's heavy oak door burst open, making a loud thud.

Dr. Clive Wimpleton entered, his wispy white hair standing on end, and his wire-rimmed spectacles askew.

Colin Scott, carrying a large leather-bound book, followed behind him, with Evangelina Coal, Cauldron Falls' resident expert on dark creatures, bringing up the rear.

"Roam! You need to see this," Clive announced, his voice cracking with excitement.

"It just flew into the bookshop," Colin added, holding up the book---a massive tome of Edgar Allan Poe's complete works. Pressed between the pages lay a bat. It was far larger than Bartie and clearly dead.

Evangelina, a striking witch---silver-streaked black hair, piercing eyes---moved forward with professional composure. "It flew directly into the bookshop's open door," she explained. "Most unusual behavior for a bat, especially one of this species. It's not native to our region."

Bartie fluttered down from Maisie's shoulder, hovering near the flattened corpse. "Frederick," he said sadly. "Always was a clumsy flyer. Sent as Ronald's advance scout, I'd wager."

"You know this bat?" Evangelina asked sharply, her attention snapping to Bartie.

Bartie nodded. "Part of Ronald's surveillance team. Terrible eyesight, even for a bat. Not surprised he met his end via literature."

"It just flew into the bookshop," Clive repeated, still shaken. "And he smashed it with the book."

"It was Poe, to be exact," Colin mused. "Seemed fitting, somehow."

Fear and excitement fueled a chaotic uproar at the pub, with voices blending together. Amid the chaos, Honey's gaze met Maisie's. "It's starting," she said grimly. "They're already watching us."

"How much time do we have?" Roam asked, his voice cutting through the noise.

Maisie glanced at the window, noticing the almost-full moon shining brightly. "Until the blood moon crests in the sky."

As if orchestrated for dramatic effect, the lights in the pub flickered momentarily, casting strange shadows across the worried faces of Cauldron Falls' residents.



"A spray tanned vampire with a comb-over?" someone whispered.

"Who'd believe such a thing?" answered another.

However, the presence of the dead bat, undeniable evidence of something strange, shifted the atmosphere from doubt to worried apprehension. In the magical town of Cauldron Falls, where the unexpected was commonplace, a vampiric invasion led by a self-absorbed fashionista now seemed plausible.

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For Sale: One Town (Vampire Friendly)

The next morning Tandy Keyes stood in her deserted real estate office, "Keyes Properties: Magical Homes for Magical Folks," and stared glumly at her empty appointment book.

Dust motes danced in the morning sunbeams slanting through grimy windows, highlighting neglected property listings with curled and faded edges.

"Another day, another zero commissions," she muttered, fluffing her over-teased hair with fingers sporting long acrylic nails painted with miniature house designs---a detail she thought would impress clients, if any ever appeared.

Her office walls were covered with outdated listings and motivational posters with phrases like "SALE rhymes with KALE!

Both are good for you!" and "Your attitude determines your altitude!

" But most telling were the magazines scattered across her desk---not the usual Magical Homes Monthly or Witches' Abodes, but titles like "Vampires After Dark" and "Immortal Living: Eternity in Style. "

Underneath the magazines was something far more precious: a leather journal with "Everett Falls" embossed on it, belonging to one of Cauldron Falls' original founders.

Tandy had "forgotten" to return it after listing the old Falls estate six months ago.

Although the empty house remained unsold, the journal's value far surpassed any potential commission.

Tandy picked up the latest vampire magazine, featuring a luxurious night club with the headline "Vampire Vacation Hotspots: Where The Eternal Go To Play." She sighed dreamily.

"That could be Cauldron Falls," she whispered, trailing a finger over the glossy images of impossibly beautiful vampires lounging by moonlit pools. "So much money... so little business sense... perfect clients."

She turned to the vision board she'd created on her office wall---magazine cutouts of mansions labeled "My Future Vampire Commission" and "Eternal Clients = Eternal Income!

" surrounded crude drawings of herself standing atop a pile of gold coins.

At the top, in glittery letters: "Tandy Keyes: Vampire Real Estate Queen! "

"No, too on-the-nose," she muttered, grabbing a marker to cross out the title. She scribbled a new one: "Tandy Keyes: Eternal Homes Specialist!"

Her reverie was interrupted by the distinctive jingle of her doorbell, which played "For Sale" to the tune of "New York, New York." Tandy hurriedly shoved the vampire magazines into a drawer and pushed a potted plant in front of her vision board.

Instead of a client, it turned out to be the mailman delivering another stack of bills.

Tandy's smile vanished as she flipped through the papers: mortgage payments for her three empty vacation rentals, office rent overdue by three weeks, and a final warning

from the Magical Properties Association threatening to withdraw her license for "failing to maintain minimum quarterly sales. "

"I need a break," she groaned, slumping into her creaky office chair. "Just one good commission. Is that too much to ask?"

She retrieved her Falls journal, turning to the page --- one she'd read countless times --- where Everett Falls' notes on the waterfall's special properties were recorded.

The waters possess remarkable adaptability to magical creatures of all kinds.

When freely given, it strengthens inherent abilities and mitigates natural weaknesses.

My experiments with various beings confirm its potential to temporarily neutralize even the most fundamental limitations of magical species.

With her finger still tracing the passage, Tandy paused at a heavily underlined warning on the next page.

However, I must emphasize that the falls' magic cannot be forced or stolen, she read aloud.

When taken against the will of Cauldron Falls' protectors, the water becomes inert--- or worse, actively harmful to the taker.

This safeguard appears to be woven into the very essence of the falls, perhaps by the founding witches themselves.

Tandy frowned at this complication. Ronald hadn't mentioned anything about the water needing to be "freely given." This could be valuable leverage in their negotiations---information she would keep to herself for now.

"A loophole," she murmured, a calculating gleam in her eyes.

"Every magical property has one, and this might be my ace in the hole when it comes to commission negotiations.

If I'm the only one who knows how to properly access the water's power.

..Finally, something those red-haired healing witches didn't know. Something that could make me indispensable instead of invisible."

She carefully marked the page with a sticky note emblazoned with "EXCLUSIVE LISTING OPPORTUNITY" in her own handwriting. This was the kind of insider information that could make her indispensable to Ronald's plan---and significantly improve her position in the vampire resort hierarchy.

"Not just Minister of Real Estate," she whispered, "but Chief Magical Water Consultant. I wonder if that comes with a corner office too?"

Tandy tapped her fingers together in thought for a few minutes. Her steely eyes roamed around her office and landed on the picturesque village just beyond the large picture window alongside the front door.

"If only they'd respected me," she muttered, thinking of the witches and warlocks who'd dismissed her abilities, who'd suggested she pursue a "less magical" career like real estate. "If they'd just given me a chance---"

Her bitter thoughts seemed answered when her magical mirror, typically used for virtual property tours, started to glow an eerie red. Tandy paused briefly before rushing to pull down the office blinds and secure the door.

"Reveal yourself," she demanded, her voice low with expectation.

The mirror's surface rippled like disturbed water, then cleared to reveal a figure sitting in what appeared to be a dimly lit cave decorated incongruously with beach-themed items---plastic palm trees, surfboards, and a neon sign reading "Fangs & Tan Lines."

"Well, well, well, Tandy! My favorite realtor! The best realtor really. Tremendous realtor." The voice was unnaturally cheery, as if its owner was trying to sound more welcoming than he naturally was.

The figure leaned into the light, revealing a middle-aged man with an unnatural complexion the shade of a pumpkin spice latte that had been left in the sun too long---artificially autumnal and somewhat concerning.

And the most unfortunate hair Tandy had ever seen---a thin blonde brush of fake hair that seemed to be glued to his shiny scalp.

He wore a Hawaiian shirt that strained slightly over his pudgy midsection, the gaudy pattern doing nothing to distract from his unnatural complexion.

"Ronald," Tandy replied, trying to hide her distaste. "What an unexpected pleasure."

A flash of gaudy gold chain appeared around Ronald's neck as the vampire adjusted his Hawaiian shirt. "It's time, isn't it? I sent my best scout to scope out the town. He's the best really. Tremendous flying abilities."

"About that," Tandy hesitated. "There's been some... developments. A witch arrived in town last night---apparently, she escaped from your vampires?"

Ronald's expression darkened for a moment, his face shifting from the buffoonish grin to something cold and calculating. The transformation was subtle but chilling---like watching a mask slip to reveal something predatory underneath.

"Drat," he hissed, his orangish features contorting in pain, then, astonishingly fast, he recovered his calm.

"I mean, great! She was supposed to get out.

We planned that escape. She didn't get out on her own, you see.

It was planned. Now she's there in advance.

Besides, she's under mind control and won't say anything. "

The rapid shift from irritation to forced cheerfulness was unsettling, but Tandy pressed on, "And I'm hearing rumors about a dead bat."

A furious expression warped Ronald's round face, his ridiculous appearance replaced by an intensity that threatened to shatter the mirror's reflection.

"Frederick! That incompetent flying rat!

I knew I shouldn't have trusted him with reconnaissance.

" He slammed a fist on his desk, knocking over a trophy that read "Runner-Up, Best Tan: Vampire Beach Week 2024. "

Just as quickly, the rage disappeared, replaced by the grinning, bombastic persona. "But no matter! Frederick was expendable, just like everybody else in this operation. Including you, Tandy."

Across the mirror, their eyes met, and a sudden, chilling fear washed over Tandy. There was nothing comical about the look he gave her---it was the gaze of a predator assessing whether its next meal was worth the effort.

Tandy swallowed hard, but recovery quickly with a practiced real estate smile. "Well, I'm not so sure the mind control thing is fool proof, but there is good news. Nobody believes the witch. They think she's crazy. So, this will still work."

"Perfect, perfect," Ronald's mood shifted instantly, his fangs gleaming in a disturbing smile. "The blood moon apex is when we make our move." He leaned closer to the mirror. "You've secured the properties I requested?"

"Working on it," Tandy said smoothly, fighting to keep her voice steady. "I've identified all the prime locations for the resort. The falls access, downtown commercial spaces, everything. Once we... remove any obstacles, they'll be ready for vampire occupancy."

She struck a pose that she'd been practicing for weeks in her office mirror — what she privately called her "vampire real estate tycoon" stance. "I've already drafted brochures for 'Fangtasia Falls: Where Eternal Life Meets Eternal Leisure!' Just a marketing concept. We can workshop it."



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"Excellent." Ronald's voice dropped to what he clearly thought was a seductive purr, but sounded more like a garbage disposal with something stuck in it.

"Remember our deal, Tandy. You help me establish Fangtasia Falls Resort, and you'll have exclusive selling rights to vampire vacation homes for eternity.

You see, I'm going to rename the town, too.

Fangtasia Falls. Has the best ring to it. Doesn't it?"

"Yes. Yes, it does," Tandy nodded enthusiastically. "And I'll be the Minister of Real Estate in the new vampire order, right? With the corner office and the special name plaque we discussed? And underlings?"

"The best corner office," Ronald assured her vaguely. "Really tremendous office. People are saying it might be the best office in the history of vampire resorts."

The word "eternity" echoed in Tandy's mind, along with visions of commission checks with many zeros.

A lifetime of selling real estate to wealthy, immortal clients.

But more than that---access to the falls water for herself.

The journal had hinted that regular exposure could permanently enhance magical abilities.

Perhaps she could finally be the powerful witch she'd always wanted to be, respected rather than pitied.

"I won't let you down," she promised. "But we need to be careful. There's a detective here---Roam O'Reilly. If he starts taking the vampire rumors seriously..."

"That's your job to make sure he doesn't," Ronald interrupted, his auburn face filling the mirror.

His tone suddenly hardened, all pretense of joviality vanishing.

"You must clear the path, Tandy. The resort must happen.

Do you know how embarrassing it was when my Florida vampire resort failed?

No one came! Apparently, vampires don't actually want to be tan! "

His voice ended in a shriek, and Tandy noticed several cringing vampires in the mirror's reflection. One, a dour figure in Victorian clothes, rolled his eyes so far back they almost disappeared into his skull.

"Don't worry," Tandy assured him, adjusting one of her many gold bracelets---a gift from Ronald featuring tiny fang designs. "I have connections. And I know just how to keep the town distracted while we prepare."

She turned to her desk where she'd laid out detailed floor plans of potential vampire properties. "I've already identified the perfect location for the Blood Spa! And the Coffin Suites! And the Plasma Bar with extended happy hour from midnight to 4 AM!"

"Beautiful," Ronald nodded. "Because if you fail me.

.." His expression changed again, the clownish facade dropping away entirely.

His eyes darkened, fangs emerged, and a raspy hiss, seeming to circumvent the mirror, whispered directly into Tandy's mind.

"I don't tolerate failure, Tandy. The last agent who disappointed me became a midnight snack for my newest fledglings. They aren't very neat eaters."

The threat hung in the air for a moment before Ronald's face suddenly snapped back to its grinning, orange-tinted mask.

"But that won't happen with you! You're the best, really tremendous.

Nobody sells property like Tandy Keyes, am I right?

" His attempt at a threatening growl was undermined by a coughing fit when some of his hair spray apparently went down the wrong way.

"I won't fail," Tandy said firmly as the mirror began to fade. "Cauldron Falls will be vampire territory by the end of the blood moon."

As the mirror returned to normal, Tandy's professional smile remained, but her eyes clouded with worry. She pulled out her phone and dialed.

"Marty? It's Tandy. Have you heard the rumors? Yes, the vampire ones. Listen, we need to talk. Meet me at my office right away."

Ending the call, she opened a drawer and pulled out business cards she'd secretly had printed: "Tandy Keyes, Vampire Real Estate Queen - Fangtasia Falls Division." The cards featured little coffin designs in the corners and blood-red lettering.

"I can always have them reprinted. Too soon?" she wondered aloud, then shrugged and tucked them back in the drawer. "No, just good preparation. That's what separates top producers from the rest!"

She strode to the front door and flung it open desperate for some fresh air.

Standing in the threshold she noticed something unusual---a small bat circling in broad daylight, behaving erratically as if searching for something.

Unlike the dead bat from the bookshop, this one was tiny with a distinctive reddish tinge to its fur.

"Another scout," she murmured. "Ronald's getting impatient."

Watching closely, the bat suddenly turned towards Main Street, where a small gathering was outside Spellbinders Bookstore. Even from this distance, Tandy could see Gloria Pendlebury's flame-red hair and hear her excited voice.

"---vampire invasion! My cousin's neighbor's familiar in Assjacket says they've had bats circling for weeks! It's all connected, I tell you!"

Beside Gloria, another witch was shaking her head emphatically. "Ridiculous superstition! This is exactly the kind of backward thinking that keeps Cauldron Falls stuck in the past!"

Tandy smiled coldly. The town was naturally dividing itself---believers versus skeptics. And divided towns were so much easier to conquer.

She closed the door and slipped back inside her office. It was time to fan the flames of discord, just as Ronald had instructed. By the time the blood moon rose, Cauldron Falls would be too busy arguing among themselves to mount any unified defense.

And she, Tandy Keyes, would finally have everything she'd ever wanted: wealth, power, and the magic that had always been just beyond her reach. Plus, that corner office with the name plaque.

"Minister of Real Estate," she practiced in the mirror, striking a pose. "No, too formal. Supreme Commander of Vampire Properties! Too military. Eternal Homes Empress!" She smiled at her reflection. "Perfect."

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### Holy Cross-Examination

Marty Tuey entered Tandy's office not long after she'd summoned him.

Adjusting his thick-rimmed glasses with the practiced gesture of someone who considered himself the intellectual superior in most rooms, he settled into a chair.

Marty's crystal shop exclusively sold stones labeled for modern problems like "WiFi Enhancement Crystal" and "Dating App Success Stone"---evidence of his self-appointed role as Cauldron Falls' modernizer.

"Vampires?" Marty snorted. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've heard since crazy Gregg Abbott tried to convince everyone his wands could boost cellular reception. Glad he's in the Salem pokey now."

"I know, right?" Tandy agreed, pouring them both cups of coffee from a pot that had been sitting on the warmer since yesterday.

She'd positioned herself strategically, so the light caught her bronze business suit at just the right angle to distract from the dusty shelves behind her. "Completely ridiculous."

A vampire magazine peeked out from the partially closed drawer. Tandy casually leaned against the desk, using her leg to push it shut while maintaining eye contact with Marty.

Marty accepted the stale coffee without complaint, too busy being indignant. "So,

some crazy witch shows up with a bat, and suddenly everyone's hanging garlic? This town is stuck in the dark ages."

"Your aunt Hester would be so disappointed to see how quickly the town has reverted to old superstitions," Tandy said, casually dropping the name she knew would trigger Marty's deepest insecurities.

She had done her research---she knew exactly which pressure points would make Marty dance to her tune.

"How is she enjoying Europe? Still revolutionizing witch education in Vienna? "

Marty's posture stiffened slightly at the mention of his formidable aunt---the woman who'd raised him with a steady diet of progressive magical theory and disdain for traditional practices.

"She's in Prague now, actually. Running workshops on 'Deconstructing Magical Binaries' or something. She's very... busy."

The slight pause told Tandy everything she needed to know. Aunt Hester was too busy changing the world to check in on her nephew---the one she'd charged with modernizing their "hopelessly backward" hometown.

"Think about it," Tandy leaned forward conspiratorially. "What if, instead of fighting these vampire rumors, we... embrace them?"

Marty's expression turned suspicious. "How exactly?"

"Vampire tourism!" Tandy said, as if the idea had just occurred to her rather than being carefully planted. "Think of the publicity. We could put Cauldron Falls on the map. 'Visit the town that vampires wanted for themselves!' We could have tours,

themed events, merchandise..."

She could see the wheels turning in Marty's head. His crystal shop had been struggling for months, despite his aunt's insistence that modern witches were the future of magic. "And my crystals could be marketed as vampire repellent alternatives for the modern witch..."

"Now you're getting it!" Tandy clapped her hands. "Just imagine the commission---I mean, the community benefits!" She caught herself, quickly adding, "Besides, vampires are technically very environmentally friendly! They don't breathe, so zero carbon footprint!"

Marty gave her an odd look but seemed too excited by the business potential to dwell on her slip.

"But first," Tandy continued, lowering her voice, "we need to make sure the town doesn't go into full panic mode. We need a countermovement. Show everyone these vampire rumors are just superstitious nonsense."

"What? That's kind of backwards. If we want this to be the town vampires wanted, why wouldn't we promote the rumors?" Marty shook his head.

"Well, first the rumors are not real," Tandy guffawed, though the lie burned her tongue like acid.

"Besides," she continued smoothly, "we need to come out on the right side of this thing. We need to be fighting the good fight. Against the old crones."

"A protest," Marty nodded, warming to the idea. "Against fear-mongering and outdated thinking. Exactly what Aunt Hester would do."



"Exactly! 'Vampires Are Fake News' or something catchy like that." Tandy refilled his coffee cup, ignoring his wince at the bitter taste. "You organize that, keep people calm, while I work on the tourism angle."

"This could finally be my chance to show that modern magic has a place here," Marty said, more to himself than to Tandy. "Aunt Hester has been saying for years that Cauldron Falls needs to evolve beyond broom-making and cauldron-brewing."

Tandy nodded encouragingly, pressing her lips into a thin line.

Cauldron Falls' traditional crafts were what made it special---what made the magical water that powered their creations unique.

The manufacturing of magical goods was the town's economic backbone, producing everything from wands to magic pointy hats.

But that economy had never found a place for a witch like her, whose meager magical talents couldn't even light a candle without a match most days.

"I saw Dottie and Darlene hanging garlic this morning," Tandy said, shaking her head sorrowfully. "And Miles was pushing 'anti-vampire' herbs at three times the normal price. Pure opportunism disguised as tradition."

"Typical," Marty muttered. "And let me guess---a protection circle around the town? Crosses in every window?"

"Some of the older warlocks were actually discussing building a giant cross in the town square," Tandy confirmed, seizing her opportunity. "Twenty feet tall, at least. A 'traditional symbol of protection,' they called it."

Marty scoffed so loud, he coughed a little. "Wasteful and unnecessary. Not to

mention potentially offensive to non-traditional practitioners."

"I agree," Tandy said, leaning forward as if sharing a secret.

"Though if they're determined to build it, they should at least consult someone with actual construction knowledge.

I overheard them planning to secure it with standard ropes, not even magically reinforced ones.

" She'd searched a few structural engineering videos online ---amazing what you could learn so quickly when properly motivated.

"Is that dangerous?" Marty asked, suddenly concerned despite himself.

Tandy waved a dismissive hand. "Only if they don't balance the tension properly. The main support ropes need to be perfectly aligned with the center of gravity, especially for something that large. Otherwise, a strong wind could send it toppling onto some innocent bystander."

She paused, allowing Marty to absorb this information. "Of course, I'd offer my advice---I did sell that custom-built tower to the Griffin family last year, had to learn all about large structure supports---but they'd never listen to me."

"Why not?" Marty's eyes widened.

"No red hair. Everyone knows only healer witches have opinions worth hearing in this town." Tandy smiled bitterly.

It was a calculated appeal to Marty's own resentments. Like her, he'd always stood outside the inner circle of Cauldron Falls' magical elite---his progressive approach to

magic as unwelcome as her limited abilities.

"Well, their loss," Marty said, standing and smoothing his precisely trimmed beard. "I'll get started on organizing the protest right away. We'll show them that rational thinking still has a place in this town."

"Perfect," Tandy smiled. "Oh, and one more thing. I heard that Roam O'Reilly is taking the vampire claims seriously. Apparently, his... relationship... with Honey Hadwin is clouding his judgment."

"Honey?" Marty's interest instantly piqued. He'd harbored an unrequited crush on the familiar trainer for years. "She believes this vampire nonsense?"

"Well, the crazy woman is claiming to be her long-lost sister," Tandy said with a performative raising of one brow. "Emotional manipulation, if you ask me. And Roam is just going along with it to keep Honey happy."

Marty's expression hardened. "I'll talk to Honey. She's too intelligent to fall for this medieval panic."

As Marty headed for the door, Tandy called after him, "Oh, and Marty? Remember, let's keep the tourism angle between us for now. Don't want anyone stealing our idea."

After he left, Tandy allowed herself a moment of genuine laughter. Useful idiots like Marty made her job so much easier. While he kept the town distracted with his protests, she could move forward with her real plans.

She opened the Falls journal again, carefully studying the pages detailing how the magical water needed to be "freely given" to maintain its power.

Forcing access would diminish its effectiveness---a fact Ronald needed to understand.

She'd have to find a way to convince the town to grant access willingly, or all her schemes would be for nothing.

"Not betraying the town if I'm improving property values," she muttered to herself. "Even if those properties will be owned by the undead!"

Tandy pulled herself out of her real estate reverie when she noticed the time on her office clock. Time for her daily attempt at basic magic. She squared her shoulders and faced the small candle she kept on her desk specifically for this purpose.

"Today's the day," she told herself, as she did every day. "Simple illumination spell. Every witch can do it. Even children can do it."

She closed her eyes, concentrating on the wick, channeling her magical energy as she'd been taught at the Cauldron Falls Witchery School. She visualized light, warmth, flame---all the elements of fire in their most basic form.

"Illuminare," she whispered, opening her eyes and pointing at the candle with practiced precision. The same word that came so easily to every other witch in Cauldron Falls, even the children.

Nothing happened.

"Illuminare," she repeated, more forcefully this time, her brow furrowing with concentration.

The wick smoked faintly.

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"ILLUMINARE!" she practically shouted, her frustration mounting as she poured every ounce of magical energy she possessed into the simple spell.

The candle wobbled slightly on its holder. The wick produced a wisp of promising smoke. Then... nothing.

Tandy's shoulders slumped in defeat. Reaching into her desk drawer, she pulled out a book of matches and struck one with unnecessary force, lighting the candle the mundane way.

"Red-haired witches don't have to use matches," she muttered bitterly, thinking of Honey Hadwin and her effortless pink aura. "No wonder I went into real estate. At least houses don't care if your magic is pathetic."

She turned to the large mirror on her office wall, practicing her professional smile until no trace of the humiliation remained. But inside, the familiar ache of inadequacy burned far hotter than any flame she'd ever managed to conjure.

"When Ronald's resort is established," she promised her reflection, "I'll have access to the falls water. I'll enhance my powers, and they'll all see. No more 'Tandy Can't-Light-A-Candle Keyes.' They'll call me 'Minister Keyes' and ask for magical advice."

Tandy spun back around, and blew out the match-lit-candle, threw open a drawer, pulled out a compact mirror, and practiced her expressions.

"No! A vampire resort? How awful!" she gasped, then frowned at her reflection.

"No, needs more horror. A vampire resort?"

How AWFUL!" she tried again, widening her eyes dramatically.

"Perfect. Totally believable." Each practiced lie came easier than the last---perhaps deception was the only magic she'd ever truly mastered.

A sharp knock at the door interrupted her rehearsal. Tandy quickly stashed the compact and arranged her features into a professional smile.

"Come in!" she called.

The door opened to reveal Mrs. Wilson, an elderly witch whose family had lived in Cauldron Falls for generations. Her silver hair was arranged in an immaculate bun, and her penetrating blue eyes missed nothing.

"Ms. Keyes," the old woman said firmly. "I'd like to know where you stand on this vampire business."

Tandy hadn't expected this direct confrontation. "Well, Mrs. Wilson, I---"

"Because I saw Marty Tuey leaving your place," Mrs. Wilson continued, her shrewd eyes fixed on Tandy's face. "Are you encouraging Marty to organize a protest? Or will you be siding with the traditionalists?"

For a moment, Tandy faltered. This wasn't part of her plan---someone actually questioning her actions directly.

"I'm simply trying to maintain professional relationships with all groups," she recovered smoothly. "In real estate, one can't afford to alienate potential clients."

Mrs. Wilson's expression remained skeptical. "Hmm." Her gaze drifted to Tandy's wall, where the corner of her vision board was still visible behind the potted plant.

Tandy quickly moved to block her view. "Mrs. Wilson! Has anyone ever told you that you have the most discerning eye for community dynamics? You should have been a sociologist! Or a detective! Or a---"

"Spare me the flattery, Tandy," Mrs. Wilson cut her off. "My late husband always said, 'Those who stand in the middle of the road get hit from both directions.' Just something to consider."

Tandy's smile froze. "That's... very wise. Speaking of community dynamics, have you tried the new muffins at Tab's Café? Completely unrelated, but I just remembered them! They're doing a special on blueberry today."

Mrs. Wilson's eyes narrowed slightly. "My husband also used to say, 'When someone changes the subject that abruptly, they're usually hiding something.'"

"Your husband sounds like he was full of... wisdom," Tandy managed.

"Indeed." Mrs. Wilson moved toward the door. "I'll be watching closely how this vampire situation develops. And who stands to benefit from the chaos. We need to stand together, Tandy. Not divided." With that parting shot, she left, closing the door firmly behind her.

Tandy exhaled sharply, her composed facade crumbling momentarily. Mrs. Wilson was too observant for comfort. She would need to be more careful---and move more quickly.

Her phone rang---Ronald's special line. She answered with practiced confidence, though her hands trembled slightly after Mrs. Wilson's unexpected challenge.

"Everything's proceeding as planned," she reported. "The town is dividing exactly as you predicted."

"Beautiful, tremendous work," Ronald's voice boomed through the connection. "You're really the best, Tandy. The greatest real estate witch. Such talent."

Tandy winced at his volume, glancing nervously at her door. "I need to accelerate our timeline. There's one thing I forgot to mention earlier. We have a dark creatures expert here in town---Evangelina Coal---I'm pretty sure she's going to examine the crazy witch today."

"That's not good, not good at all," Ronald responded, his tone darkening. "Experts are bad news, very bad. You'll need to deal with that situation, Tandy. I'm counting on you."

"I have a plan for Evangelina," Tandy assured him, twisting the gold bracelet on her wrist. "But I'll need that special formula you promised---the one that neutralizes magical defenses."

"Already delivered! The best anti-magic formula. Really tremendous stuff." Ronald's voice regained its bombastic quality. "Check the dead drop we discussed. You'll find everything you need to eliminate obstacles."

After ending the call, Tandy pulled out the Falls journal again, studying the underground water tunnels with renewed focus. Her eyes lingered on a passage: "The waters respond to intention. Force diminishes their power; freely given, they unlock their full potential."

This was the key---the town would need to grant access willingly.

She closed the journal and grabbed her coat. The dead drop Ronald mentioned would



contain the tools she needed to remove Evangelina Coal---permanently. One strategic "accident," and the town's expert would be gone before she could mess up anything.

Tandy paused, practicing once more in her compact mirror: "What a terrible tragedy!

Poor Evangelina!" Then she smiled at her reflection and whispered, "When Ronald's resort is up and running, I'll finally get the respect I deserve.

Minister of Real Estate in the new vampire order has such a nice ring to it. "

As she left her office, she adjusted the small vampire-shaped brooch on her lapel, then thought better of it and removed it entirely. No need to give Mrs. Wilson more ammunition. The comical bauble---Ronald's idea of subtle solidarity---would have to wait until after the blood moon.

By then, Cauldron Falls would be under new management, and Tandy Keyes would finally have the client list she'd always dreamed of---one that would last for eternity.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Coal Mining (for Truth)

From the moment the large bat was squished between the pages of Poe and the witch who predicted a vampire invasion arrived the evening prior, Evangelina Coal had been on the hunt for answers.

Her consultation space occupied the top floor of an ancient stone building on the edge of town.

Unlike most establishments in Cauldron Falls, there was no cute sign, no whimsical name---just a small wooden plaque reading "E.

Coal - Specialist in Dark Creatures." The simplicity reflected her direct approach, honed over two centuries of studying the darkest corners of the magical world.

"Is that real vampire ash?" Honey whispered, pointing to a glass jar containing what looked like gray powder.

"No, it's just fancy bath salts," the expert's assistant, a bored-looking teenage witch was filing her nails with supernatural precision. She barely looked up as she spoke. Her outfit was entirely black except for a name badge reading "Tiffany, Assistant Dark Creatures Specialist."

"We have an appointment with Evangelina," Roam said. "For Maisie Hadwin."

Tiffany glanced up, her heavily lined eyes widening slightly at the sight of Bartie perched on Maisie's shoulder. "Oh. The vampire bat case. She's expecting you." She

pressed a button on her desk. "Go on through." As they disappeared into the inner office, Tiffany returned to her nail filing.

The inner office was befitting of Evangelina's reputation, dark, cluttered, and distinctly magical. Ancient books filled towering shelves, strange instruments hung from the ceiling, and the air smelled of sage and something metallic. Behind a massive oak desk sat Evangelina Coal herself.

She was surrounded by ancient tomes, and artifacts collected over decades of study.

Her piercing green eyes narrowed as she studied a faded illustration of a vampire resort scheme from the late 1980s.

She cross-referenced the image with reports from three other magical communities---all had experienced mysterious 'accidents' before vampire incursions.

"Florida," she murmured to herself. "Why does that sound familiar?"

On her desk lay a leather-bound journal much like the one Tandy had stolen---another volume from the Falls family collection, this one detailing the protective properties of Cauldron Falls water against dark creatures.

Evangelina's was on the brink, and she could feel it.

Her research was bringing her dangerously close to understanding the full scope of Ronald's plan.

At first glance, she looked like any other professional witch in her late one-hundreds---silver-streaked black hair tied back, crisp button-down shirt, reading glasses perched on her nose.

But her eyes, when she looked up from her notes, revealed her true age---unnervingly penetrating, with the depth that came only from centuries of experience.

"Detective O'Reilly. Ms. Hadwin," she nodded to each of them before her gaze settled on Maisie. "And you must be the sister. With the bat."

"Bartie, at your service," the bat introduced himself with a little wing flourish. "Familiar, currently unaligned."

"Fascinating." Evangelina stood, revealing her impressive height. She towered over the sisters by nearly a foot. "A bat familiar. Very unusual."

"Not really," Bartie said. "Only in America."

Evangelina ignored this, focusing on Maisie. "Tell me about Ronald."

Maisie shivered slightly at the name. "He's the leader.

Not very old for a vampire---turned in the 1840s, I think.

Obsessed with looking more human. "He's ridiculous looking," Maisie said, her voice dropping with remembered dread despite herself, "with skin the color of artificial cheese, a blonde feathered thing on his head that's more hairspray than hair, and a bedazzled wardrobe that looks like he murdered a craft store and is wearing the evidence. "

"And he wants Cauldron Falls?" Evangelina asked.

"For a resort," Maisie nodded. "The water from the falls has magical properties that can help vampires overcome their weaknesses. Not completely, but enough to make them stronger, more resistant to their traditional vulnerabilities."

Evangelina made a notation in her book. Her handwriting was elegant and precise, the penmanship of someone who had learned to write in a different century. "And how many vampires are in his coven?"

"Fifteen, maybe twenty," Maisie replied. "Most are newly turned and not very bright."

"Classic narcissistic leadership," Evangelina murmured. "And you were their prisoner? For how long?"

Maisie's face clouded. "I don't... remember everything. Ronald did something to my mind, and my memories."

"Can you help her?" Honey asked, reaching for her sister's hand.

Evangelina studied Maisie with those penetrating eyes that had witnessed the rise and fall of many dark creatures. "I need to perform a full magical assessment. Detective O'Reilly, Ms. Hadwin, if you could wait outside? This requires focus and privacy."

Roam looked reluctant, but Honey nodded. "We'll be right outside if you need us," she told Maisie, squeezing her hand before they left.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

Sister, Sister (Finally!)

In the waiting room, Honey paced nervously while Roam stood by the window, keeping watch on the street below.

"The town's going crazy," he observed. "Half of them preparing for a vampire apocalypse, the other half insisting it's all nonsense."

"Marty Tuey," Honey said with distaste. "Always trying to prove he's above 'old-fashioned' magic."

"And Tandy Keyes has been oddly visible today," Roam added. "I've seen her talking to just about everyone in town."

"Probably sees a business opportunity in the chaos," Honey said. "She's been desperate for sales."

The doorknob rattled, and Tiffany looked up from her nails. "Um, there's like, a ton of people outside. They all want consultations or protection amulets or something. Ms. Coal already said she won't be able to see anyone else today after your sister."

Roam peered out the window again. Sure enough, a line had formed outside the building, stretching halfway down the block.

"This is getting out of hand," he muttered.

The inner office door opened, and Evangelina emerged, looking troubled. Maisie

followed, her expression dazed, with Bartie hovering protectively near her ear.

"Well?" Honey asked anxiously.

Evangelina glanced at the growing crowd outside her window and beckoned them all back into her private office, lowering her voice.

"Your sister has indeed been in contact with vampires.

There are magical traces consistent with their presence---" she paused, looking puzzled, "---but they're oddly. .. cosmetic."

"Cosmetic?" Roam asked.

"Yes. I found extensive traces of what appears to be a magical aerosol spray. When exposed to my diagnostic spells, it turned bright orange." Two centuries of studying dark creatures had taught her to read the subtlest signs of supernatural influence.

Maisie nodded, suddenly remembering. "The spray! They would douse me with it daily. Ronald's 'Vampire Essence Number Five'---he made it himself. Said it would mark me as his property."

"It's essentially supernatural hairspray," Evangelina continued, fighting back a smile. "With about as much actual power. Though it does create a traceable signature that vampires can follow."

"Like a really persistent perfume," Bartie added. "Quite nauseating, actually. Smells like rotting oranges mixed with excessive masculinity."

"What about the blood moon? The attack?" Honey pressed.

Evangelina's expression grew more serious. She moved to a tall bookshelf and pulled down an ancient leather-bound tome, its covers worn smooth by centuries of handling. She placed it on her desk, opening to a page with medieval illustrations of vampires performing rituals beneath a crimson moon.

"Blood moons aren't just pretty light shows," she explained, her voice taking on the measured cadence of a lecturer. "They create a unique arcane window---a period when the barriers between certain magical states become temporarily permeable."

She turned the page to reveal intricate diagrams of astronomical alignments.

"For vampires specifically, a blood moon amplifies their natural abilities and weakens their traditional vulnerabilities.

During a blood moon, they're stronger, faster, and more resistant to silver, garlic, and religious symbols all of which weaken them. Only a silver stake to the heart will actually kill them, or you must remove their heads with your bare hands."

"That's intensely scary stuff. Is that why Ronald is waiting for the blood moon?" Honey asked, studying the illustrations with growing concern.

"Partly," Evangelina confirmed. "But more critically, blood moons enable permanent territorial claims." Her finger traced a complex runic circle on the page.

"Magical creatures have been using blood moons for territorial rituals for millennia.

Werewolf packs, fairy courts, and yes, vampire covens---they all recognize the power of a blood moon for establishing claims that will endure beyond the celestial event itself. "

"So, if Ronald completes his ritual during the blood moon," Roam said slowly, "the



vampire claim on Cauldron Falls wouldn't end when the blood moon passed."

"Precisely," Evangelina nodded gravely. "It would become permanent. And that's why the timing is so crucial. The exact moment when the blood moon reaches its apex---that's when the magical influence is strongest."

Maisie visibly trembled. "That's exactly what Ronald kept talking about. He was obsessed with the cresting of the moon."

"Combined with the falls' magical water," Evangelina continued, closing the book with a gentle thud, "Ronald could create a permanent vampire sanctuary that would be nearly impossible to dismantle once established."

The water would amplify the blood moon's effects, potentially allowing vampires to overcome their natural limitations indefinitely. "

Maisie twisted the silver chain around her neck nervously. "There's something else about the water that Ronald doesn't know---or at least, I don't think he knows."

Evangelina leaned forward, her centuries-old eyes sharpening with interest. "Go on."

"The falls water has to be freely given," Maisie explained, her voice growing more confident as she accessed a memory that had been clouded by Ronald's attempts at mind control.

"I overheard some of his followers arguing with him about it."

They had been researching magical waters and warned Ronald that trying to take the falls by force would render them useless. "

"Did Ronald listen?" Honey asked.

Maisie gave a bitter laugh. "Ronald never listens to anyone. He dismissed it as 'negative thinking' and told them to be more 'tremendous' in their attitude."

Evangelina rushed to her desk and returned with the Falls journal. "This aligns with what I've read about Cauldron Falls' founding magic. The original witches built in protections---safeguards against those who would steal the water's power."

She found the page she was looking for and nodded in satisfaction. "Here---Everett Falls' journal mentions it specifically: 'The waters respond to intention. Force diminishes their power; freely given, they unlock their full potential.'"

"Ronald's plan has a fundamental flaw," Roam observed.

"One that his insider---whoever they are---either doesn't know about or is deliberately hiding from him," Evangelina agreed, her expression turning thoughtful. "This could be crucial to our defense."

She scribbled a note in her elegant handwriting: "Water must be freely given---potential strategy against vampire invasion."

"And what about my memories?" Maisie asked. "Why can't I remember everything clearly?"

"Ah, that's more complex," Evangelina said, consulting her notes. "It seems Ronald attempted vampire hypnosis on you repeatedly. The problem is, he's remarkably bad at it. Instead of creating clean memory blocks, he's created a sort of... mental static. Your memories are there, just scrambled."

"Like a badly tuned radio," Bartie offered helpfully.

"Exactly," Evangelina confirmed. "I also noticed something interesting. The constant

exposure to vampire auras---even through that ridiculous spray---has given you some residual abilities. Can you sense when people are being dishonest?"

Maisie's eyes widened. "Yes! I thought I was imagining it. I can... smell when someone's lying. It's like they give off this sour odor."

"A useful skill," Evangelina noted. "Though probably not worth years of fashion shows and spray tan exposure."

"Definitely not," Maisie agreed.

"Then we need to prepare the town," Roam said decisively.

"Not so fast," Evangelina cautioned. "There's more I need to research. The Cauldron Falls Archives contain historical records of similar incidents. I should check them immediately."

"When will you know more?" Honey asked.

"Tonight," Evangelina replied. "Meanwhile, you should take Maisie somewhere safe to rest."

"FACTS & FIBS," Honey suggested. "It's protected by multiple wards."

Evangelina nodded approval. As they walked back into the front office, Evangelina cast a weary glance at the crowd of anxious townspeople outside her door.

"Tiffany, tell them I'll be conducting research and can't see anyone else today.

If they want protection, direct them to Gwen Lewis.

She's selling those crystal amulets at her wand shop.

They won't ward off vampires, but they'll make people feel better. "

Tiffany smirked and nodded, clearly used to delivering disappointing news to clients. She opened the front door. A cacophony of voices immediately flooded in, all demanding protection, information, or confirmation of their vampire theories.

"Ms. Coal isn't seeing anyone else today!" Tiffany announced loudly. "She's conducting critical research to protect the town!"

The crowd erupted in protests, but Tiffany stood firm, one hand on her hip, the other pointing back toward town.

"Gwen Lewis has protective crystal amulets.

Ms. Coal will make an announcement when she has concrete findings.

" Closing the door, Tiffany flipped a switch on the wall, that illuminated a 'Closed' sign in the window.

As the crowd reluctantly dispersed, Roam, Honey, and Maisie prepared to leave through a side door to avoid attention. Evangelina was gathering books and notes into a large leather satchel.

"I'll contact you as soon as I have more information," she promised. "Be careful. If there are vampires watching the town, they may have allies helping them."

"You mean someone here is working with them?" Honey asked, alarmed.

"It wouldn't be unprecedented," Evangelina confirmed. "Vampires often recruit locals

with promises of power or wealth. Keep your eyes open for anyone behaving oddly."

As they prepared to part ways, there was a sharp knock at the side door. Roam motioned for everyone to stay back while he checked who it was.

"Ms. Coal?" called a falsely cheerful voice they all recognized. "It's Tandy Keyes! I see your office is closed, but I simply must speak with you about a private matter. It's quite urgent!"

Evangelina rolled her eyes. "That woman has been trying to sell me a larger consultation space for months." She moved toward the door but paused when Bartie suddenly fluttered in agitation.

"I don't like this," the bat whispered. "Something feels wrong."

Roam signaled for silence, then called through the door. "Ms. Keyes, Evangelina is very busy. Perhaps you could make an appointment."

There was a moment of silence, then Tandy's voice came again, noticeably less cheerful.

"Oh! Detective O'Reilly. I didn't realize you were here."

Yes, of course, an appointment. It's quite urgent and pertains to.

.. property vulnerabilities that Ronald might exploit.

I thought Ms. Coal might find it relevant to her research. "

Evangelina and Roam exchanged meaningful glances.

"I'm sure it can wait until tomorrow," Roam called back firmly.

"Very well." The distinctive click of her high heels retreated down the path.

"That was suspicious," Honey said.

"Very," Roam agreed. "I'll look into exactly what Ms. Keyes has been up to today."

As they opened the side door cautiously, Maisie suddenly stopped. "She's lying," she said quietly. The sour smell of deception was unmistakable now that her senses were clearing---Tandy reeked of it.

"What?" Honey asked.

"Tandy Keyes. When she said it could wait... I could smell it. She was lying." Maisie looked surprised at her own ability. "That's... kind of cool, actually."

"Your first successful use of vampire detection," Bartie said proudly. "Though technically, you're smelling lies, not vampires."

"Still counts," Maisie said with a small smile---the first genuine since she arrived in Cauldron Falls.

As they left through the side exit, Evangelina watched them go with a thoughtful expression. She had her own suspicions about Tandy Keyes, and now she had research to conduct that might confirm them.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Commission Impossible

Cauldron Falls trembled on the edge of chaos. The giant cross towered in the town square, its shadow stretching ominously across the cobblestones. Tandy strutted toward it in her designer pumps, carrying a clipboard she'd hastily labeled "OFFICIAL STRUCTURAL ASSESSMENT" in glittery purple ink.

"Coming through! Professional with construction experience!" she announced to the workers, flashing a laminated business card as if it were an inspection badge. "Just need to make sure this baby won't topple over and squish anyone important---I mean, anyone at all!"

The workers exchanged dubious glances but stepped aside. One leaned to another and whispered, "Isn't she just a real estate agent?"

"Yeah, but she keeps saying she used to be in construction," his colleague shrugged. "And honestly, none of us knows what we're doing either."

Tandy circled the massive cross, making exaggerated hmm-ing noises and scribbling nonsense on her clipboard. Occasionally, she'd tap a support rope, squint dramatically, and mutter something that sounded vaguely technical.

"This northernmost support needs additional... tensional... counterbalancing," she declared, pointing to the very rope she intended to sabotage. "The gravitational... load bearing... tensility is clearly compromised."

As Tandy examined the rope, a memory flashed unbidden through her mind---herself

at thirteen, standing before the Cauldron Falls Witchery School examination board.

The test had been simple: light three candles.

The other students had completed it with ease, their candles flaring to life with confident gestures.

When her turn came, she'd tried so hard---concentrating until her head pounded, whispering the incantation perfectly. But only the faintest wisp of smoke had appeared on the first wick. Nothing at all on the other two.

"Perhaps," the head examiner had said with poorly disguised pity, "you should consider a career that relies less on innate talent. Real estate, perhaps? My cousin did quite well in that field despite her... similar limitations."

The laughter had been soft but unmistakable---the kind adults use when they think children can't recognize mockery clothed in politeness.

Twenty years later, the memory still stung. She blinked it away, focusing instead on the sabotage at hand.

"Is that even a word? Tensility?" one worker whispered behind her.

"Sounds smart, so probably," another replied.

Tandy smiled tightly. They might question her terminology, but soon, when the falls water enhanced her abilities, no one would question her magic again. She'd make sure of it.

When the workers turned their attention elsewhere, Tandy quickly pulled a small vial of orange liquid from her purse. She glanced around furtively before applying a drop



to the rope---then froze when she realized she was being extremely obvious, standing on tiptoes with a suspicious vial in hand.

She immediately pretended to be applying lip gloss, smacking her lips loudly. "Can't inspect crosses with dry lips! That's just Construction Inspection 101!" she announced to no one in particular.

A passing warlock gave her an odd look but continued on his way.

"This cross needs to fall exactly---" she muttered, then caught herself as a worker glanced her way. "I mean, this cross seems very sturdy! Tremendously sturdy! No chance of collapse!" She punctuated this with a high-pitched laugh that caused several birds to flee from nearby trees.

### Archive Fever

The archives occupied the basement of the town's oldest building---a stone structure predating even the founding of the magical community.

Unlike the modern witch structures above, the archives retained their ancient character: rough stone walls, narrow windows set high near the ceiling, and shelves upon shelves of magical records dating back centuries.

Evangelina descended the worn stone steps, her leather satchel slung over one shoulder. The archive door recognized her magical signature and swung open with a groan of ancient hinges.

"Still refusing to be oiled, I see," she murmured to the door, which creaked again as if in response.

Inside, the air was cool and dry, preserved by spells that had been maintained for generations. The Lights flickered to life as she entered, illuminating rows of shelves containing scrolls, books, and various magical storage devices unique to different eras.

Evangelina moved purposefully to the historical section, where records of supernatural encounters lived. But as she reached for the catalog, she paused. Something felt... off.

She turned slowly, surveying the room. Nothing seemed disturbed. The lights cast their usual warm glow, and the silence was the comfortable quiet of an empty library.

And yet...

"Hello?" she called, feeling slightly foolish. The archives were restricted. Only a handful of people in Cauldron Falls had access. Still, the prickling sensation on the back of her neck persisted---a warning system that had kept her alive through two centuries of studying dark creatures.

Shaking it off, Evangelina pulled several large tomes from the shelves and settled at an ancient oak table. She opened her notebook and searched.

"Vampire encounters, regional history," she muttered, flipping pages. "There must be something..."

The lights flickered briefly, causing her to look up with a frown. That wasn't normal---the preservation spells should prevent any magical fluctuations.

Again, that feeling of being watched. She casually reached into her satchel, fingers closing around a small vial of protection powder, while continuing to flip through the book before her.

"Found you," she whispered triumphantly as her eyes landed on an entry. "Vampire incursion, 1897..."

The lights flickered again; more pronounced this time. A soft sound---like fabric brushing against stone---came from somewhere to her left.

Evangelina didn't look up. "Whoever's there, I should warn you: I've specialized in dark creatures for near two centuries. Sneaking up on me would be inadvisable."

Silence answered her. The temperature in the ancient stone room plummeted twenty degrees as Evangelina inhaled. A familiar chill that always made her smile.

A translucent figure materialized near the tall shelves---an elderly woman in Victorian-era clothing, her pearl necklace catching the archive lights. Her presence filled the room with the comforting scent of lavender and old books.

"Oh, my stars," the ghost said with theatrical dismay, her voice like wind chimes in a gentle breeze. "I do hope I'm not interrupting anything important. Though judging by the magical research spread about, I'd say this session has proven quite educational."

Evangelina's brief startle melted into a warm smile. "Minerva! Perfect timing, as always. I was hoping you might appear---I could use your expertise." She gestured to the scattered tomes around her. The ghost's presence always brought clarity to complex supernatural threats.

"Though I must say, when my time comes to cross over, I do hope I'll have the chance to join you here among all these wonderful books. Imagine having eternity to read through the entire collection without interruption." Evangelina smiled.

"Really, dear Evangelina, such morbid thoughts," Minerva replied, though her expression was fond.

"Though I must admit, the afterlife does have its perks---unlimited research time, no need for sleep, and the ability to eavesdrop on the most fascinating supernatural conversations.

" She smoothed her ethereal skirts with dignity.

"Speaking of which, this Ronald fellow and his vampire schemes have provided quite the entertainment.

Orange skin and a comb-over? In my day, vampires had more dignity. "

Evangelina chuckled, settling back in her chair. "I take it you've been listening to the supernatural gossip network again?"

"Indeed, I have," Minerva nodded approvingly. "Familiars are the worst chatterboxes you can imagine. But this situation is more serious than Ronald's ridiculous appearance suggests."

She floated closer to Evangelina's research. "Ronald's plan has a fundamental flaw that even his inside accomplice doesn't seem to understand."

She floated closer to Evangelina's research materials. "What you must understand about the falls water is this: it doesn't just need to be freely given---it responds to the giver's true intentions. The water has a consciousness of sorts, and it judges the heart of whoever channels it."

"What do you mean?" Evangelina asked, setting down her pen.

"The water becomes whatever the giver truly desires in their heart," Minerva explained.

"If someone offers it with genuine protective intent, it becomes a shield against evil.

But if offered with deception, malice, or selfish intent.

.." The ghost's smile turned sharp. "Well, let's just say it becomes quite hostile to the intended recipients. "

Evangelina's eyes widened with understanding. "So, if someone were pretending to help vampires but actually hoping they'd be harmed..."

"The water would sense that true intent and act accordingly," Minerva confirmed.

"It's quite elegant, really. The original witches who blessed these falls were remarkably clever."

"This changes everything about how we defend the town," Evangelina murmured, making rapid notes.

"Indeed. And there's something else you should know," Minerva continued, her expression growing serious. "There's betrayal coming from within Cauldron Falls. Someone is working with Ronald---someone desperate enough to believe his promises of wealth and power."

"Who?" Evangelina asked sharply.

"That, I'm afraid, you'll need to discover for yourself.

But watch for someone with access to town defenses, someone struggling financially, someone who feels overlooked or undervalued.

"Minerva began to fade slightly. "The living and the dead can work together, you know.

I've been watching Cauldron Falls for nearly two centuries---there are always threats, and they often come from where you least expect them. "

"Will you help us?" Evangelina asked.

"I'm bound to these archives, but I can share what I observe. And remember---sometimes the best weapon against darkness is simply knowing the truth about someone's heart, and the true nature of the magic you're protecting."

With that, the ghost began to fade, her final words echoing in the cold air: "When the

blood moon rises, trust in the falls' wisdom and remember---the water will know the truth even when people lie. Use that knowledge well."

The temperature returned to normal as Minerva vanished, leaving Evangelina alone with her research and a crucial new understanding of how the falls' magic truly works.

She immediately began writing notes about the water's responsiveness to true intent---information that would prove vital in the coming battle for Cauldron Falls.

### Down Goes the Cross

Tandy moved through town, her elegant blue suit and gold jewelry drawing attention while her strange behavior attracted confused stares.

She reached into her purse, her fingers closing around Ronald's vial of anti-magic formula.

She needed to ensure the cross was properly sabotaged before Evangelina crossed the town square again.

One "accident," and her biggest obstacle would be eliminated.

Fortunately, the town was distracted. In the square, Marty's protest had grown, his followers waving signs proclaiming "VAMPIRES = FAKE NEWS" and "FACT-CHECK YOUR FEARS!"

"Directly opposite, Gwen Lewis and her traditional faction brandished garlic bundles and chanted protection spells.

The two groups faced each other with growing animosity, the massive cross standing between them.

Tandy circled back to the cross, pretending to casually examine the crowd while edging closer to the northern support rope. When she thought no one was watching, she pulled out the vial and reached for the rope.



"Ms. Keyes," a stern voice called. "What are you doing?"

Tandy whirled to find Mrs. Wilson watching her with suspicion, the elderly witch's eyes flicking from Tandy's hand to the rope and back again.

"Mrs. Wilson!" Tandy exclaimed, quickly hiding the vial behind her back. "What a pleasant surprise! Lovely weather for a protest, isn't it? Or a counter-protest? Or just standing here admiring this impressively large religious symbol?"

"You didn't answer my question," Mrs. Wilson said, her voice cutting through Tandy's babbling. "What are you doing with that cross?"

"Cross? What cross? Oh, this cross!" Tandy laughed nervously. "Just checking the stability. Did I mention I used to work in construction? These support ropes seem concerning. Very concerning. Deeply concerning."

Mrs. Wilson's expression remained skeptical. "Is that so? Then perhaps you should inform someone rather than poking around alone."

This was an unexpected complication. Tandy needed to divert the old woman's attention before she noticed the orange liquid in the vial.

"You know, Mrs. Wilson, has anyone ever told you that you have the most discerning eye for structural integrity? You should have been an architect! Or a bridge inspector! Or a professional rope quality assessor!"

Mrs. Wilson's eyes narrowed further. "Tandy Keyes, I've known you since you were a child who couldn't light a candle without setting her own pigtails on fire. Your manipulation techniques haven't improved since then."

Tandy gasped in indignation. "Manipulation? Me? I'm just a simple real estate witch

who happens to know an awful lot about structural failure points! Completely normal!"

Before Mrs. Wilson could respond, a commotion erupted at the edge of the square. Dr. Clive Wimpleton had arrived, his wispy white hair standing on end, clutching a large leather-bound book with something flattened between its pages.

"Another bat!" he announced to the gathered crowd. "Found this one trying to enter my home!"

The dead bat, far larger than Bartie and clearly belonging to a different species, stirred both factions into a frenzy. Even Marty's skeptics looked unsettled by this new evidence.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Tandy fumbled in her sleeve for a small charm--- a backup plan she had purchased for unexpected interference. It released a pre-programmed pulse of confusion magic directly at Mrs. Wilson.

"Look, Dr. Wimpleton found another bat!" Tandy pointed frantically. "You should go see it, Mrs. Wilson! Very educational! Much more interesting than boring old ropes!"

Mrs. Wilson blinked rapidly. Her focus temporarily shattered by the spell. "What was I... what were we discussing?"

"You were telling me about your concerns regarding the vampire rumors," Tandy said smoothly. "And then you were going to examine that fascinating dead bat. Right over there."

While Mrs. Wilson struggled to reorient herself, Tandy quickly applied Ronald's formula to the rope. The orange liquid sizzled slightly as it made contact, the fibers briefly glowing before returning to normal.

"That should do it," she whispered, patting the rope as if giving it encouragement. "Don't fall yet!"

The new bat discovery filled the square with more townspeople. Their anxious conversations creating a steady murmur. Tandy positioned herself strategically across from the commotion, ensuring she'd have a clear view of the cross and the tainted rope, while maintaining plausible deniability.

She pulled out her pocket watch, a gift from Ronald engraved with tiny fangs around the edge. "Almost time," she murmured, then noticed a passing warlock staring at the unusual timepiece.

"Family heirloom!" she explained loudly. "The fangs represent... um... the passage of time... eating away at our lives! Very philosophical. Very normal. Not vampire-related at all!"

The warlock backed away slowly.

Evangelina emerged from the archives, moving briskly toward the center of the square with a satchel full of research materials. Her path, as Tandy had predicted, would take her directly beneath the cross.

The wind picked up suddenly, causing the enormous structure to sway slightly. Several people glanced up nervously, but the workers' assurances that it was perfectly secure had calmed most concerns.

Tandy tensed, her fingers curling around the small trigger device in her pocket. "Come on, just a few more steps," she whispered, watching Evangelina approach the cross. "Nothing personal, just business. Very lucrative eternal business with excellent commission structure. Besides you are very old."

But as her finger moved to activate the trigger, a firm hand clamped down on her wrist.

"I wouldn't," Mrs. Wilson said quietly, her grip surprisingly strong for her age. The confusion spell had worn off faster than expected. "Whatever you're planning, it stops now."

"Mrs. Wilson!" Tandy exclaimed with exaggerated delight. "How wonderful to see you again! Have you lost weight? Your hand looks absolutely stunning wrapped around my wrist like that!"

"Save the flattery," Mrs. Wilson replied sternly. "I don't know what game you're playing, but---"

"Game? What game? Chess? Checkers? 'Betray Your Town? Never heard of that last one! Completely made it up just now!" Tandy laughed shrilly.

Evangelina was now directly beneath the cross, clutching her satchel, pausing to speak with Colin Scott about the second vampire bat. Neither noticed the support rope beginning to fray above them, individual fibers snapping one by one.

Desperate, Tandy jerked her hand free and activated the trigger. The compromised rope snapped with a sound like a gunshot.

"Oh, my goodness, what was that?" Tandy gasped in practiced horror, already reaching for the compact mirror in her pocket to check if her "shocked" expression was convincing. "The rope broke! What a completely unexpected and totally non-suspicious accident!"

The massive cross began to tilt---slowly at first, then gaining momentum like a falling giant.

Roam O'Reilly emerged from a side street, his enhanced Shifter senses alerting him to the danger above. He shouted a warning, lunging toward Evangelina and Colin.

Evangelina looked up, her reflexes responding instantly.

She dropped her satchel and raised her hands, her fingers moving in patterns practiced over two hundred years of combating dark forces.

A shield spell formed around her, the air shimmering with a brilliant midnight blue protective magic---but something was wrong.

The shield sputtered and failed as the cross's wooden surface flickered with an orange glow upon contact with her spell.

The crowd's screams pierced the air as twenty feet of heavy timber came crashing down. Roam managed to push Colin clear, but Evangelina had no time to move.

The impact shook the cobblestones. Dust billowed across the square, momentarily obscuring the fallen structure and its victim.

As the dust settled, revealing the grim scene, Tandy quickly arranged her features into her pre-practiced expression of horror.

It was immediately clear she hadn't survived the impact.

Her leather satchel lay crushed beside her, ancient books and notes scattered across the cobblestones.

The knowledge she had gathered---knowledge that might have saved them---was now lost in the chaos.

"Oh, NO! The CROSS FELL! How TRAGIC!" she exclaimed, her voice carrying just the right note of distress while her eyes darted to her watch to confirm the timing. "Right on---I mean, what a terrible tragedy!"

She hurried forward with the crowd, positioning herself near enough to verify Evangelina's fate but far enough to avoid suspicion. The dark creatures expert lay motionless beneath the massive timber, her centuries of knowledge silenced in an instant.

"If only someone had checked those ropes more carefully," Tandy lamented loudly, dabbing at perfectly dry eyes with a monogrammed handkerchief.

"Such a terrible accident. Absolutely no one could have predicted this completely random event that just happened to eliminate our town's only vampire expert right before the blood moon! "

Mrs. Wilson pushed through the crowd, her eyes locking with Tandy's. The elderly witch's expression made it clear that she suspected the truth, but in the chaos of the moment, her accusations would be lost amidst the general panic.

As Roam organized efforts to lift the cross and retrieve Evangelina's body, Tandy slipped away from the square, allowing herself a small smile of satisfaction.

"It's not betraying the town if I'm improving property values!

" she whispered to herself. "Even if those properties will be owned by the undead!

Besides, think of all the jobs the vampire resort will create!

Vampire maids, vampire concierges, vampire tour guides.

.. and one very, very rich vampire real estate agent! "

She ducked into an alley and pulled out her phone, sending a quick message to Ronald: "Obstacle removed. Now nothing stands between you and your claim on Cauldron Falls. P.S. Do you still think Minister of Real Estate is a good title for me? How about Vampire Housing Czar? Either works!"

The response came almost immediately: "Beautiful! Tremendous! The best assassination! You're going to be so rich, Tandy. So rich. The richest real estate witch ever."

Tandy clutched the phone to her chest, already imagining her future office in Fangtasia Falls, complete with blood-red carpet and eternal clients who never haggled over her commission. Maybe Ronald would even let her try the spray tan.

As the blood moon approached, Tandy Keyes returned to her office to prepare for the final phase.

Tomorrow night, Ronald Bitterhump would arrive to claim Cauldron Falls, and Tandy would finally have everything she'd ever wanted: wealth, power, and the respect that had always been denied to the witch who couldn't even light a candle without a match.

She practiced her greeting in front of her mirror: "Welcome to Cauldron Falls, your vampireness! No, too formal. Hey there, Ronald, ready to revolutionize undead real estate? Perfect!"

Behind her on the wall, her vision board glittered with promise in the fading light, the words "Eternal Commission" seeming to pulse with anticipation of the blood moon to come.

### Bait and Witch

In his office, Roam methodically examined the broken ropes from the fallen cross, his panther-like eyes detecting details invisible to others.

His nostrils flared occasionally, capturing scents that witches couldn't perceive.

The rope fibers held traces of an unfamiliar smell---something chemical beneath the natural hemp, something that didn't belong.

"What do you think?" Honey asked, standing nearby as he worked. They had moved the cross fragments to a secure area behind the town hall, away from curious onlookers.

"Definitely sabotage," Roam confirmed, his slight southern accent more pronounced with concentration. "The rope was tainted with something that burnt it almost all the way through, add a little wind, maybe something else, and disaster."

He lifted a section to his nose, then quickly pulled back, his enhanced Shifter senses rebelling against the acrid scent. "Some kind of anti-magical compound too. That's why Evangelina's shield failed."

"Who in Cauldron Falls would have access to something like that?" Honey wondered.

Roam's expression darkened. "That's the concerning part. This isn't something you'd find at the local apothecary. It would have to be specially ordered or created."



He stood, brushing wood dust from his hands. His movements were purposeful but carried an underlying tension---the professional investigator battling with a personal concern for the town he protected and the people he cared about.

"We should check with Miles," he suggested. "He might recognize the compound. And we need to talk to Leahnora about increased security. If there's a traitor working with the vampires."

"I can't believe anyone from Cauldron Falls would do this," Honey said, though her voice lacked conviction. Her pink aura flickered with distress. "To kill Evangelina... to betray their own community..."

"Desperation makes people capable of terrible things," Roam replied grimly. "And vampires are skilled manipulators. They find weaknesses, exploit insecurities."

Outside, a hawk named Louie who delivered official announcements---swooped down to perch on a nearby post.

"Attention citizens!" Louie declared in his deep, resonant voice. "Emergency town meeting called by Mayor Loveridge! Town hall, thirty minutes! Attendance mandatory! Information regarding vampire threat and security measures to be discussed!"

The hawk repeated the message once more before flying off to another part of town. Already, people were beginning to move toward the town hall, their faces reflecting a mixture of fear, determination, and, in some cases, lingering skepticism.

"Leahnora must have made a decision," Honey noted.

"Let's hope it's the right one," Roam replied, gathering the rope evidence into a secure container. "With Evangelina gone, we've lost our best expert on vampires."

As they headed toward the town hall, neither noticed a small, folded note that had been slipped under the door of Roam's office. Written in elegant script was a simple message: "The hunter arrives at dawn. Prepare for his protection."

The note was signed with a small symbol---a crescent moon intersecting with a pentagram, Leahnora's personal seal.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

Keyes to the Kingdom (of Darkness)

Tandy Keyes slipped into Evangelina Coal's office with the practiced ease of someone accustomed to viewing properties without permission.

Knowing how to 'let yourself in' was a professional necessity.

She was dressed in what she'd mentally labeled her "sneaky but professional" outfit--- a black pantsuit with gold buttons that unfortunately reflected light like tiny beacons with every movement.

Her chunky gold earrings swung violently as she tiptoed through the darkened office, creating periodic flashes that briefly illuminated her progress.

"Stealth mode activated," she whispered to herself, while her clicking heels echoed loudly on the wooden floor. She tried walking on her tiptoes but nearly toppled over. "Note to self: develop vampire-ninja real estate training program for Fangtasia Falls staff."

The building stood unnaturally quiet in the wake of its owner's death, the artifacts that had once hummed with Evangelina's centuries-old energy now subdued, as if in mourning.

A silver pendulum that had continuously swung on Evangelina's desk had stopped mid-arc, frozen at the precise moment of her death.

"Creepy," Tandy muttered, feeling a momentary chill despite herself. "But also,

potentially valuable! Mental note: ask Ronald if vampires collect antique magical items. Could be a whole new market segment!"

She moved through the shadowed consultation room, passing shelves of ancient tomes whose spines seemed to turn away from her touch, as if the books themselves recognized her betrayal.

Several protective amulets on the wall began to glow with faint warning light as she approached, their enchantments still active even with their caster gone.

"Oh, shush," she told a particularly bright amulet, attempting to cover it with her scarf. "I'm just browsing! Like an after-hours open house!"

Tandy was searching for anything the expert might have accumulated before her untimely "accident.

" Her gaze darted to the antique clock on the wall---she had perhaps twenty minutes before the town meeting where Leahnora would announce next steps.

Evangelina's death had thrown Cauldron Falls into even deeper chaos, and Tandy needed to ensure no damning evidence remained.

She found the center drawer of Evangelina's oak desk locked. Her fingers hovered over the brass pull, which radiated with midnight blue protective magic.

"Of course there's a spell," she sighed dramatically. "Couldn't just use a normal lock like regular property owners."

Drawing a small vial from her pocket labeled "Ronald's Super Secret Vampire Formula (NOT Just Spray Tan With Glitter)" in her own handwriting, she carefully applied three drops to the pull. It hissed and evaporated, though not without leaving a

small burn mark on Tandy's finger.

"Clever old witch," she muttered, sucking her injured finger while using her other hand to open the folder. "Also, ow! This better not affect my ability to point dramatically at properties! It's a key part of my sales technique!"

Inside were detailed accounts of vampire attempts to establish territories in magical communities, including Ronald's failed Florida resort.

Evangelina had compiled cross-references from multiple sources, creating a comprehensive picture of vampire tactics---especially their use of human collaborators.

One page even listed warning signs of potential vampire allies in a community.

Tandy scanned down the list with growing unease:

- Sudden interest in properties near great sources of power
- Unusual questions about town defenses
- Unexplained travel or communications
- Acquisition of anti-magical devices or substances

She had done all these things in the past month. Had Evangelina suspected her before today? Evangelina knew all this before she went to the archives?

"I knew I should've dealt with her sooner," she whispered, stuffing the folder into her oversized handbag decorated with miniature house keys.

"Also, this checklist is way too obvious.

They should really make these harder to identify.

Maybe include some red herrings like 'sudden interest in kale farming' or 'excessive hat-wearing. '"

A noise from the outer office made her freeze.

Moving silently to the door (or as silently as possible in three-inch heels), she peered through the crack to see Tiffany, Evangelina's teenage assistant, collecting her things.

The girl's eyes were red from crying, her usual bored demeanor replaced by genuine grief.

"I can't believe she's gone," Tiffany sniffled to herself, running her fingers over a small crystal ball on her desk. "Who's going to train me now?"

Tandy watched, calculating her options. Tiffany had access to Evangelina's records, appointment book, and possibly her private correspondence. She could be a liability.

"Oh, Tiffany, you frightened me," Tandy declared, flinging open the office door with a dramatic gasp, her hand pressed to her chest. "I'm so sorry about Ms. Coal. So, so, SO sorry. Just devastating. A tragedy! Absolutely nobody could have predicted that cross would fall at that EXACT moment!"

The teenager looked up, startled. "Ms. Keyes? What are you doing here?"

"I had an appointment scheduled with Evangelina," Tandy explained, her expression shifting seamlessly from overly dramatic grief to sympathetic concern.

"I came to... well, to offer my condolences and cancel, of course.

When I couldn't find you. Well," She gestured around the office.

"You must be devastated. She was your only mentor.

Your guiding light! Your magical North Star!

Your professional lighthouse in the stormy seas of dark creature expertise! "

Tiffany's shoulders slumped, giving Tandy a weird look at the excessive metaphors.

"Yeah. She was teaching me about dark creature identification.

Said I had a natural talent for it." Her voice cracked slightly.

"Now I'll probably end up doing retail magic at Witchy Wear & Hair like everyone else with no connections. "

Tandy sensed an opportunity. "You know, I've always thought you were wasted as just an assistant.

Someone with your observational skills should be doing more substantial work.

" She lowered her voice conspiratorially.

"In fact, I might have a position opening up soon in my, uh, expanded business operations.

Something that requires discretion and attention to detail. "

The flattery landed perfectly. Tiffany straightened slightly, her tearful eyes brightening. "You think so?"

"Absolutely," Tandy nodded earnestly. "I can already see you handling all the scheduling for the Vamp--- I mean, for the Very Important People who will be my future clients.

The elite clientele of tomorrow's Cauldron Falls!

Not that there's any major change coming to Cauldron Falls! That would be crazy!"

She laughed too loudly, then cleared her throat. "Out of curiosity, did Evangelina keep records of her recent consultations? For liability reasons, I should probably ensure my appointment is officially canceled."

Tiffany hesitated, her grief momentarily battling with the potential opportunity Tandy had dangled. "She kept everything in her appointment crystal. It's in her desk, but I'm not supposed to access it without permission."

"Of course, of course," Tandy backed off smoothly. "I wouldn't want to put you in an awkward position. Though I imagine Leahnora will want all of Evangelina's recent work, given the circumstances of her death."

"You think it wasn't an accident?" Tiffany asked, leaning forward with the macabre interest typical of teenagers.

"Between us," Tandy lowered her voice conspiratorially, "Detective O'Reilly is treating it as suspicious.

The rope was deliberately messed with, I think.



They think the vampires did it!" She gasped dramatically, then added: "Not that I have any inside information about vampire schemes!

I'm just repeating gossip! Regular old town gossip that anyone might have heard! "

"They think the vampires did it?" Tiffany asked, suddenly wide-eyed.

"That's the obvious conclusion," Tandy agreed.

"Though some are questioning why vampires would use such a mundane method rather than their own abilities.

" She shrugged elegantly. "But that's for the professionals to determine.

I'm just a humble real estate agent. With no vampire connections whatsoever!

None! Zero! Perfectly normal real estate witch here! "

The self-deprecation worked. Tiffany's gaze softened with trust. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to check the appointment crystal. Just to help the investigation."

As the girl turned to open Evangelina's desk, Tandy allowed herself a small smile of triumph. She had effectively diverted Tiffany's attention from her presence in Evangelina's private office while gaining access to potentially damaging records.

When Tiffany returned with the crystal, a small pyramid-shaped object that glowed with a soft blue light, Tandy made a show of concern for the girl's emotional state.

"Are you sure you're all right being here alone?" she asked. "After such a shocking event, you really should have company. Why don't you let me handle canceling my appointment, and you can take some time for yourself?"

Tiffany looked relieved at the suggestion. "Maybe I should go home. My mom's been calling nonstop anyway."

"Excellent idea," Tandy encouraged. "Family is so important in times like these.

I can lock up when I'm done. You know, I'll be listing the place, anyway.

Nobody wants a ghost haunting their business!

Not that I've thought about this property's future market value during this tragic time. That would be highly inappropriate!"

After Tiffany left, Tandy waited until the door closed before turning her attention to the appointment crystal. Unlike the folder, this wouldn't fit in her handbag. She'd need to either destroy it or alter the records.

She found the crystal, still glowing faintly with an unsent message. Picking it up carefully, she activated it to display the contents.

"Roam---Ronald's tried this before. Florida, 1987. Failed vampire resort. Tandy working with them. Beware the cross. Water only works if freely given---"

The message cut off there, never completed or sent. Tandy gasped in indignation.

"She spelled my name right! That is so unfair! Why does the evil villain always get proper name recognition when half my clients still call me 'Candy'?"

After a moment of vanity-based outrage, the actual content of the message sank in.

"Wait, this is bad. This is very bad. This is career-endingly bad! Reputation-destroyingly bad! Corner-office-with-name-plaque-revokingly bad!"

She crushed the crystal in her hand, ignoring the sharp edges cutting into her palm.

"Too late, Evangelina," she whispered. "But nice try."

Blood from her cut hand dripped onto the appointment crystal, which absorbed it with an ominous hiss. The blue glow turned briefly red before fading completely, the records corrupted beyond recovery.

Tandy examined her bleeding palm with a pout. "Great. The things I do for eternal commission. This better not leave a scar---how am I supposed to dramatically point at property features with a scarred hand? Clients expect perfect hand modeling in this business!"

She slipped out through the back door of Evangelina's office, leaving no trace of her presence except a single business card deliberately placed on the desk---a little professional touch she couldn't resist.

The card read: "Tandy Keyes, Vampire Real Estate Queen" with the tagline "Selling Cauldron Falls Properties For Centuries To Come!" in tiny print at the bottom.

"Oops, wrong card," she muttered, noticing too late that she'd left one of her prototype vampire realtor cards. "Oh well, nobody will connect the dots. That would require actual detective work!"

As she walked away, the magical instruments in Evangelina's office began to stir again, as if disturbed by some unseen force. The pendulum that had stopped at her death began to swing once more, but erratically, its rhythm disrupted by the dark magic that now tainted the space.

Back in her car, Tandy checked her reflection in the mirror, practicing different facial expressions.

"Shocked about vampire arrival!" she gasped, widening her eyes dramatically. "Concerned about community welfare!" she frowned, furrowing her brow. "Innocent of all wrongdoing!" she declared with an unconvincing look of virtue.

She finally settled on what she considered her most professional expression---a practiced smile that revealed just the right amount of teeth without looking predatory. Perfect for greeting both her current witch clients and her future vampire ones.

"Soon," she whispered to her reflection. "Very soon."

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Town Hall Meeting

The town hall was packed beyond capacity, the air thick with tension.

The divisions within Cauldron Falls had grown more defined in the hours since Evangelina's death.

Gwen Lewis and her traditional faction occupied the left side of the hall, many wearing multiple strands of garlic and clutching various protective talismans.

Marty Tuey's modernist skeptics huddled on the right, though their numbers had noticeably dwindled.

In the center sat a growing contingent of pragmatists---those who had decided to take some precautions without fully embracing either extreme. They watched both sides warily, clutching both traditional protections and modern defensive crystals.

Leahnora Loveridge stood on the raised platform at the front, her dark auburn curls gleaming in the light from the massive chandeliers lining the ceiling. Despite her petite stature, she commanded attention with her mere presence.

"Citizens of Cauldron Falls," she began, her voice amplified to reach every corner of the room.

"We face a crisis unlike any in recent memory.

Today, we lost a valued member of our community in a tragic incident.

Evangelina Coal was a respected expert whose counsel guided us through many challenging times. "

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the crowd.

"We must now determine how to proceed in light of both her loss and the warnings she was investigating." Leahnora's gaze swept the room. "The claims of vampire activity near our town."

Immediately, the room erupted into opposing shouts. Marty Tuey and his supporters called for an end to "fear-mongering," while those who believed the vampire threat demanded immediate action.

"SILENCE!" Leahnora commanded, her power briefly manifesting as a visible aura around her small frame. The room instantly quieted.

"We will hear from both sides in an orderly fashion," she continued. "First, Detective Chief Inspector Roam O'Reilly will present the facts of today's incident and the evidence regarding the vampire claims."

Roam stepped forward, scanning the crowd before he spoke.

"Today's incident was not an accident," he stated firmly. "The support rope on the cross was deliberately sabotaged. We are treating Evangelina Coal's death as a murder."

Gasps and exclamations filled the hall. Roam waited for the noise to subside before continuing.

"We have evidence suggesting Evangelina discovered critical information about a potential vampire threat to Cauldron Falls.

Her research indicated that a vampire named Ronald Bitterhump attempted to establish a vampire resort in Florida in 1987, which failed.

We believe he now has similar intentions for Cauldron Falls, specifically targeting our falls. "

Marty Tuey stood up. "And what actual evidence do you have of these vampires? Besides the word of a mentally unstable witch and her British bat?"

From her seat in the front row, Tandy Keyes nodded slightly at Marty's arguments.

Roam fixed Marty with a steady gaze. "We have the body of a non-native vampire bat found at Spellbinders Bookstore.

We have Evangelina's professional assessment, confirming Maisie was under vampire thrall.

And we have historical records from the Cauldron Falls Archives documenting Ronald's previous attempt.

Found on Ms. Coal at the time of her demise. "

"Circumstantial at best," Marty countered. "And convenient that the only 'expert' who could verify these claims is now dead."

A murmur of uncertainty rippled through the center faction. Tandy watched with satisfaction as doubt spread across previously resolute faces.

Leahnora raised a hand for silence. "We will now hear from Maisie herself."

Honey led her sister to the platform. Maisie looked better than she had upon arrival---

cleaner, more rested---but still visibly traumatized. Bartie perched on her shoulder. His tiny bat face unusually solemn.

"I was his prisoner for years," Maisie began, her voice soft but steady. "Ronald and his coven kept me in their compound in the mountains. They... used me for my ability to help identify potential territories with magical properties."

"And why would vampires need a witch for that?" someone called out skeptically.

"Because vampires can't directly interact with certain types of magic," Maisie explained. "Especially natural magic, like the falls. They needed someone who could test the water, determine its properties."

"The water from Cauldron Falls has protective qualities for our community," Honey added. "Evangelina's research suggests it could also benefit vampires, allowing them greater resistance to their traditional weaknesses."

"Convenient that we can't verify any of this," Marty muttered loudly.

Maisie flinched at the hostility, but continued.

"Ronald plans to establish a vampire resort here.

He wants to market the falls as a spa treatment for vampires, allowing them to move more freely in daylight, resist garlic and religious symbols.

He's... desperate for this to succeed after his Florida failure. "

A few chuckles broke out at the mention of the Florida resort but were quickly silenced by Leahnora's stern gaze.



"The blood moon rises tomorrow night," Maisie concluded. "That's when they'll come. Ronald believes the moon's power will strengthen their claim on the territory."

As Maisie returned to her seat, the meeting descended into chaos again---arguments erupting between those who believed her and those who sided with Marty's skepticism.

Leahnora allowed the discussion to continue for several minutes before calling for order again.

"Regardless of individual beliefs," she said firmly, "we cannot ignore a potential threat to our community. Especially when connected to a confirmed murder. Therefore, I am implementing emergency security measures effective immediately."

She outlined a plan involving increased Shifter patrols, a town-wide protective barrier spell, and a curfew beginning immediately. She also announced her decision to contact an outside expert.

"Given the loss of Evangelina Coal, I have sent for Vlad Marcum, a renowned vampire hunter who has handled similar situations in other communities. He should arrive shortly."

At the mention of Vlad Marcum, Tandy Keyes's composed expression slipped momentarily, revealing a flash of panic before she quickly recovered. From his perch on Maisie's shoulder, Bartie noticed this reaction, his keen bat senses picking up on her increased heart rate.

"Who is Vlad Marcum?" Gloria stood up.

"One of the most experienced vampire hunters in the world," Leahnora explained. "He has faced Ronald Bitterhump before and knows his tactics. If anyone can help us

prepare for tomorrow night's blood moon, it's Vlad."

Throughout the hall, reactions to this announcement varied dramatically.

Gwen's traditionalists nodded with approval---a professional hunter aligned with their belief in immediate action.

Marty's skeptics rolled their eyes at what they saw as more fear-mongering.

The middle faction seemed relieved that an outside expert was being consulted, someone who might provide a balanced perspective.

As the meeting adjourned, people broke into heated discussion groups. The division in the town was palpable---exactly as Ronald and Tandy had planned.

Tandy slipped away from the hall, her mind already working on a new problem. Vlad Marcum complicated things. If he had faced Ronald before, he might recognize the signs of an inside collaborator. She would need to neutralize him quickly, before he could share his knowledge.

Pulling out her phone, she typed a terse message to Ronald: "Complication. Vampire hunter Vlad Marcum arriving."

The response came almost immediately: "Eliminate him. Blood moon will not wait."

Tandy glanced back at the town hall, where Honey and Roam were deep in conversation with Leahnora. This vampire hunter would bring new challenges---and another unfortunate "accident" for Cauldron Falls.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Dead Evidence Walking

After the town hall, Roam and Honey carefully searched Evangelina's office, looking for any clues the dark creatures expert might have left behind.

"Tandy was definitely here," Roam said, holding up the business card she'd carelessly left on the desk. "Vampire Real Estate Queen? She wasn't even trying to hide her involvement."

Honey's fingers traced over the shattered remains of Evangelina's appointment crystal. "She destroyed something. Whatever Evangelina discovered, Tandy didn't want us to find it."

As Honey emptied the papers and remains of the satchel on the desk, a torn piece of paper fluttered to the floor. She bent to retrieve it, her eyes widening as she recognized Evangelina's elegant handwriting.

"Roam, look at this."

The note was partially ripped most likely in the chaos of her murder. Only fragments remained legible:

"...water must be freely given to maintain its power. If taken by force, the falls will turn..."

"...Ronald's previous attempt in Florida failed because..."

"...vampire coven vulnerable to the water when used with proper intent..."

"...Tandy Keyes working as inside..."

Roam's expression hardened as he read the fragments. "This confirms our suspicions about Tandy. And it gives us something else---information about the falls water."

"Evangelina figured it out before she died," Honey said softly, running her finger over the torn paper. "The water has to be freely given, not taken, and it might actually turn against the culprit."

"This changes our strategy," Roam nodded, carefully folding the scrap of paper. "Instead of just defending the falls, we can use them actively against Ronald's coven."

"We need to tell Vlad when he arrives," Honey said, a new determination in her voice. "And Maisie. If the falls water responds to intent, her connection might be even more important than we realized."

As they left the office, Honey paused in the doorway, looking back at the space that had been Evangelina's domain for over a century. "She's still helping us, even after death."

"That's Evangelina," Roam said with grim satisfaction. "Always one step ahead."

### Have Stakes, Will Travel

Before dawn word had spread throughout Cauldron Falls that the vampire hunter had arrived. A crowd gathered in the town square, eager to catch a glimpse of the legendary Vlad Marcum. The crowd was not disappointed by what they saw when the hunter finally appeared.

Vlad Marcum was a character straight out of an adventure novel---tall, weathered, and clad in a leather outfit festooned with various vampire-hunting tools that clinked softly with each movement.

His broad-brimmed hat shaded piercing blue eyes, and a prominent scar ran from his left temple to jawline---a souvenir from his first encounter with vampires, if the whispers were to be believed.

Three silver stakes hung from his belt, each engraved with runes in an ancient language, while vials of colored liquids filled a bandolier across his chest.

"G'day, Cauldron Falls citizens!" he boomed as he strode into the square, a massive equipment bag slung over one shoulder. "Vlad Marcum, vampire hunter, at your service!"

He swung his bag down with a clatter of wooden stakes and silver implements. "Heard you've got yourself a bloodsucker problem! Well, you can rest easy now. Never met a vampire I couldn't dust!"

Roam watched this theatrical entrance with barely concealed skepticism. He had been

waiting in the square with several Shifter officers, expecting a professional consultant. What they got was closer to a vampire-hunting theme park character.

"Mr. Marcum," he greeted, extending a hand. "Detective Chief Inspector Roam O'Reilly. We appreciate your prompt response to Mayor Loveridge's request."

"Call me Vlad, mate!" the hunter replied, gripping Roam's hand with enthusiastic force. His accent was an impossible blend of Australian outback and Eastern European cadences. "Everyone does! And I never ignore a call about vampires. Especially not Ronald Bitterhump!"

This caught Roam's attention. "You know Ronald?"

"Know him?" Vlad laughed heartily, but his eyes took on a hardened quality that belied his jovial tone.

"Tangled with that bloke three times! Miami in '87, Phoenix in '95, and almost nabbed him in Denver back in 2010!

" He pulled down the collar of his shirt to reveal a set of distinctive slashes on his neck.

"Got this little memento in Phoenix. Would've been a goner if not for my emergency anti-vampire kit. Bugger almost got me."

Despite his theatrical demeanor, Vlad's knowledge seemed legitimate. Roam decided to reserve judgment until he saw the man in action.

"We believe Ronald is planning to attack tonight, during the blood moon," Roam explained, leading Vlad toward town hall. "He has at least one accomplice within Cauldron Falls who's already murdered our local dark creatures expert."

"Classic Ronald," Vlad nodded sagely, his expression darkening momentarily.

"Always works through proxies. Too scared to show his big orange face until the groundwork's laid.

Too vain to risk his spray tan, more like.

" He pulled a journal from inside his jacket---a weathered leather volume covered in handwritten notes and sketches.

"Been tracking that blighter for decades.

Each time, same pattern---find a location with special properties, identify a desperate local to help establish his foothold, then sweep in during a celestial event for maximum power. "

Vlad flipped through the journal, showing a detailed timeline of Ronald's previous attempts. "Florida---failed because vampires don't want to be tan. Phoenix---tried to market 'blood icicles' as a summer treat. Denver---nightclub slash resort called 'Fang Zone.' All failures, but he keeps trying."

"Any idea who his local contact might be?" Roam asked, impressed by the hunter's detailed records despite his flamboyant manner.

Vlad's gaze swept the square, taking in the various townspeople with surprising shrewdness.

"From experience? Look for someone with financial troubles, social grievances, or limited power.

Someone who stands to gain significantly from a vampire takeover.

And someone with access to restricted areas or influence over town decisions. "

Before Roam could respond, a voice called out from across the square.

"Mr. Marcum! Welcome to Cauldron Falls!"

Tandy Keyes approached, wearing an expression of exaggerated relief. She had dressed conservatively today---a muted gray suit rather than her usual bold colors, as if mourning Evangelina's death. But her eyes darted nervously, taking in Vlad's equipment and journal with barely concealed alarm.

"Thank goodness you've arrived!" she continued, her voice perfectly modulated to convey both concern and respect. "I'm Tandy Keyes, local property specialist. I've prepared a complete map of the town for your assessment, highlighting all access points to the falls."

She extended a roll of parchment, which Vlad accepted with a curious tilt of his head. His weathered fingers brushed against hers for a fraction longer than necessary, and Tandy resisted the urge to pull away.

"Mighty helpful of you, miss," he said, studying her face with unsettling intensity. "You always this prepared for visitors?"

"Only the important ones," Tandy replied with a winning smile, though a thin sheen of perspiration had formed on her forehead. "And someone with your reputation... well, Cauldron Falls is fortunate to have your expertise in this troubling time."

Roam noticed something pass between them---a look of assessment from Vlad, a barely perceptible tension in Tandy's posture.

"Ms. Keyes has been really involved in the town's response to the vampire threat,"



Roam noted carefully, watching for reactions from both of them.

"Just doing my civic duty. You know me. Helpful Tandy. That's kind of a nickname for me...

around town." Tandy responded her fingers twisted her gold bracelet nervously.

"In fact, I was hoping to offer Mr. Marcum a tour of the key defensive positions around town.

My real estate background gives me unique insight into Cauldron Falls' geography. "

"Appreciate the offer," Vlad said, his jovial tone unchanged, but his eyes sharper.

"But first I'll need to meet with this Maisie sheila---the one who escaped from Ronald's compound. Firsthand accounts are gold in my line of work."

Tandy's smile flickered momentarily. "Of course. Though I should mention that many in town question the reliability of her claims. She seems rather... unstable. If you know what I mean."

"I'll be the judge of that," Vlad replied firmly.

"Seen all sorts in my years of hunting. Sometimes the craziest-sounding witnesses are the most accurate.

" He tapped a scar near his eye. "Got this in Budapest when I dismissed a 'crazy' old janitor's tale about vampires in the subway system.

Learned my lesson about judging credibility based on first impressions. "

Leahnora Loveridge emerged from the town hall, her petite form commanding

immediate attention. "Mr. Marcum, welcome to Cauldron Falls. I see you've already met Detective O'Reilly and Ms. Keyes."

"Mayor Loveridge," Vlad bowed with surprising grace for such a rugged figure. "Ready to hunt some vampires for you, ma'am. And may I say, your town's magical signature is quite remarkable. The falls' energy is detectable even from here."

Leahnora's eyebrows rose slightly---few visitors could sense the falls' magic without direct exposure. "You're sensitive to magical currents?"

"Comes with the job," Vlad explained, tapping the silver medallion hanging from his neck.

"After forty years hunting the undead, you develop a certain.

.. awareness. Plus, this little beauty helps.

" He held up the medallion, which contained a small vial of clear liquid.

"Water from seven magical sources around the world. Resonates with similar energies."

"We appreciate your help," Leahnora responded formally. "Detective O'Reilly will brief you on our security preparations, and then we'd like you to assess Maisie's account of her captivity."

"Perfect plan," Vlad agreed, tipping his hat to Tandy. "Thanks for the map, love. Might take you up on that tour later."

As Roam led Vlad toward town hall, the vampire hunter leaned in and murmured, "Interesting town you've got here, Detective. That real estate sheila seems mighty

eager to help."

"You noticed," Roam replied quietly. "She's our primary suspect in Evangelina Coal's murder."

Vlad's expression didn't change, but he gave a nearly imperceptible nod. "Ronald always picks the ambitious ones. Easy to manipulate with promises of wealth and power." He glanced back at Tandy, who was watching them with poorly concealed anxiety. "What's her particular weakness, I wonder?"

"We're still investigating," Roam admitted. "But she's been struggling financially. She's sitting on a book of properties that haven't sold in months. And she's not the most talented witch on the block."

"Ah," Vlad nodded knowingly. "Financial desperation combined with status anxiety. Ronald's favorite combination. Offer them money and prestige, dangle the promise of being 'special' in his new order."

"You really do know him," Roam acknowledged, his initial skepticism fading.

"Tracked that bloke for decades," Vlad confirmed. "His pattern's always the same. The only thing different this time..."

"What?" Roam prompted when Vlad paused.

The vampire hunter's scarred face turned grave. "This is the first time he's targeted a place with water this powerful. If he succeeds here, Ronald won't just have a vampire resort. He'll have a way to create near invincible daywalkers."

Roam felt a chill at this confirmation of what they had feared. "Then we need to make sure he fails."

"That we do, mate," Vlad agreed. "That we do."

Behind them, Tandy Keyes watched their retreating figures, her expression calculating. She pulled out her phone and sent a terse message: "Hunter knows too much. Will act soon."

Fang You Very Much

Vlad Marcum stood in Honey's kitchen at FACTS & FIBS, carefully examining Maisie while Honey, Roam, and Bartie watched. The vampire hunter's theatrical manner had been replaced by unexpected professionalism as he examined her for signs of vampire influence.

He moved with the practiced efficiency of someone who had performed similar examinations hundreds of times before. His weathered hands were gentle as he checked the spray residue on her wrists and examined the faint marks on her skin.

"Supernatural hairspray, all right," he confirmed, sniffing at her wrist then quickly pulling back with a grimace. "Ugh, smells like a tanning bed exploded in a cologne factory. Definitely Ronald's signature scent. I'd recognize it anywhere."

Maisie, who had initially tensed at being examined, was now watching Vlad with growing fascination. Unlike her earlier encounters with strangers, she seemed more at ease, sitting up straight rather than hunching defensively.

"Can you tell how long I was in captivity?" she asked.

Vlad studied the patterns of faded spray on her skin. "Based on these layered residues, I'd say at long enough. Since you were little."

"Sounds right," Maisie repeated softly, her eyes distant. "That fits with the fragments I remember."

"Ronald's not great at memory wipes," Vlad explained, rummaging through his equipment bag. "More like memory scrambles. He thinks he's being subtle, but it's like using a sledgehammer for needlepoint."

"Is there anything you can do to help her remember?" Honey asked.

"As a matter of fact..." Vlad produced a small vial of iridescent liquid from his bag. "This might help. Anti-vampire serum. Won't restore memories overnight, but it'll start clearing the mental fog."

He handed the vial to Maisie. "Fair warning---tastes like possum roadkill marinated in gym socks."

Maisie looked at the vial skeptically. "Will it help me hide from Ronald? He can track me through the spray."

"It'll interfere with the tracking signal," Vlad confirmed. "Make it harder for him to pinpoint your location for sure."

With a determined expression, Maisie downed the contents in one gulp. Her face immediately contorted in disgust. "That's... horrific! Worse than you said!"

"But effective," Vlad assured her, watching as the spray residue on her skin began to fade slightly. "Now, tell me everything you remember about Ronald's compound and his plans for Cauldron Falls."

Maisie's account was more detailed than before, the serum already helping clear some of the mental static.

She described the mountain compound where she'd been held---a former ski resort converted into Ronald's headquarters.

She recalled the daily spray treatments, the forced attendance at fashion shows, and the way she'd been made to test water samples from various locations.

"He's been searching for this opportunity for years," she explained. "He thinks it's the key to overcoming vampire weaknesses and getting back into proper vampire society. When his scouts found Cauldron Falls, he became obsessed."

"So, I was right. He wants the falls water to create a breed of invincible daywalkers," Vlad mused when she finished. "Makes sense. He's been obsessed with overcoming vampire limitations since the 80s. His Florida resort was actually an attempt to build tolerance to sunlight."

"Which failed spectacularly," Bartie added from his perch. "Several vampires were reduced to ash. Quite the scandal in vampire circles. Ronald was laughed out of three consecutive Vampire Councils."

Vlad's eyebrows shot up. "You're remarkably well-informed for a fruit bat."

"I have unfortunate connections in unfortunate places," Bartie shrugged. "One doesn't choose one's relatives, does one?"

"Your relative is a vampire bat?" Honey asked, surprised.

"My third cousin twice removed on my mother's side," Bartie admitted reluctantly. "Frightful bore at family reunions. Always going on about his 'liquid diet' and how it keeps his coat so glossy."

"The vampire bats Ronald uses for surveillance," Maisie explained. "They're not just pets---they're actual relatives of his vampire coven. When a vampire turns, their familiar often transforms too."

"But not all vampire bats are related to vampires," Bartie clarified hastily. "Most are perfectly respectable fruit-eaters who just happen to look a bit sinister."

Vlad laughed, the sound surprisingly warm. "Your bat's a treasure, Maisie. Now, about Tandy Keyes---you mentioned seeing her at the compound?"

Maisie nodded. Her expression suddenly more focused, as another memory surfaced. "Yes! She visited several times. I remember now---she was showing Ronald maps of Cauldron Falls. He called her his 'inside witch' and said she'd make sure everything was ready for his arrival."

"Classic," Vlad said, nodding to Roam. "He did it with a time-share salesman in Florida, a nightclub owner in Phoenix. The Denver fellow was a real estate developer too---specialized in exclusive mountain properties."

"What happened to them?" Honey asked, though she suspected she knew the answer.

"The Florida salesman disappeared when the resort failed. The Phoenix nightclub owner is serving twenty years in Salem for multiple murders Ronald committed. And Denver..." Vlad's expression darkened. "Let's just say high mountain cliffs are dangerous places for midnight meetings."

"We need proof to bring Tandy in," Roam said. "Something concrete linking her to Evangelina's murder."

Roam pulled out the note fragment they'd found in Evangelina's office.

"Evangelina discovered something critical before she died.

According to her research, the falls water must be freely given to maintain its power.



If Ronald tries to take it by force, it becomes useless---or possibly even harmful---to vampires. "

Vlad studied the paper, his weathered face lighting up with understanding. "This changes everything. Instead of just defending the falls, we can use them as a weapon."

"Maisie's connection to the water means she could direct it with the right intention," Honey added, glancing at her sister.

Maisie looked uncertain, but nodded. "I can feel the water responding to me. If it needs to be freely given, then maybe my willingness to share it is what matters."

"That's brilliant," Vlad said, his theatrical persona giving way to genuine strategic thinking. "We'll create a trap---let Ronald think he's winning access to the falls, but instead of resisting completely, we have Maisie channel the water deliberately. Not taken but given with protective intent."

"A Trojan horse of magical water," Bartie observed from his perch. "Rather poetic justice for a vampire obsessed with appearances."

"Evangelina's last gift to us," Roam said solemnly. "She figured it out before Tandy silenced her."

"Then let's make sure her sacrifice wasn't in vain," Honey said, squeezing Maisie's hand. "We'll use her knowledge to protect Cauldron Falls."

Vlad nodded approvingly. "This might be my final battle with the orange vampire. There's something disturbingly bittersweet about it all."

"This is all awesome, but we still need proof to get Tandy," Honey said.

"I also might be able to help with that proof," Vlad grinned, his adventurer persona returning. "Been tracking accomplices for decades---learned a thing or two about tripping them up. Give me a few hours with this Tandy sheila. I'll get her to reveal her hand."

"That could be dangerous," Honey warned. "If she realizes you suspect her..."

"Danger's my business, love," Vlad winked. "Besides, she already tried to lure me on a tour of Cauldron Falls defensive locations.' Subtle as a sledgehammer, that one."

"You need backup," Roam insisted. "She's already killed once."

"No offense, mate, but you're too recognizable. Town's Chief Inspector shadows me, she'll spot it immediately." Vlad patted his equipment bag. "I've survived three encounters with Ronald himself. I can handle one desperate realtor."

Roam looked unconvinced but nodded reluctantly. "Be careful. She's more dangerous than she appears."

"Aren't they all?" Vlad chuckled, readjusting his hat. "Now, I need to go inspect your town's defenses with a certain vampire sympathizing murder. When the blood moon crests. That's when Ronald will make his move."

He pulled out a worn pocket watch and checked the time. "Not much time to prepare, but I've worked with less."

As Vlad left, Maisie turned to Honey. "I like him," she said with a small smile. "He's ridiculous but... I don't know, there's something comforting about that. Like he's not afraid of the monsters."

Honey was struck by how much more relaxed her sister seemed. The constant

vigilance and tension that had characterized her since her arrival were still present, but noticeably diminished. She was sitting normally now, not pressed against a wall or perched on the edge of her seat, ready to flee.

"How are you feeling?" Honey asked gently. "That serum seems to be helping."

"I feel... clearer," Maisie said, sounding surprised. "Like I can think without everything being shrouded in fog. And I'm remembering more --- not just the bad parts, but before. Running with you when we were kids."

"I remember too," Honey whispered. "That night in the forest, when we were separated..."

"We'll have time for those memories later," Roam interrupted gently. "Right now, we need to focus on keeping everyone safe through tonight."

Maisie nodded, her expression becoming more determined than fearful. "I want to help. I spent years being their prisoner. I want to be part of stopping them."

Bartie fluttered his wings approvingly. "Now that's more like it! From victim to vampire hunter --- quite the character arc."

Maisie laughed --- a genuine sound that made Honey's heart lift. "I don't know about hunting, but I could definitely help identify Ronald's weaknesses. His vanity is at the top of the list."

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### Cliff-Hanger Special

The path to the falls narrowed precariously as Tandy led Vlad along the cliff edge. Late afternoon shadows stretched across the rocky terrain, the approaching blood moon already influencing the quality of light. Below them, jagged rocks waited in silent menace.

"The falls themselves are just beyond this ridge," Tandy explained, gesturing ahead with elaborate tour-guide enthusiasm. "But first, I've prepared a special viewing area. Just through these trees."

She guided him off the main path toward a small clearing that offered a partial view of the falls. Vlad followed, his hand casually resting near one of the many tools on his belt. His eyes never stopped scanning---the path, the surroundings, and Tandy's increasingly suspicious behavior.

"Here we are!" Tandy announced cheerfully. "The perfect spot for professional vampire hunters to appreciate natural wonders!"

As Vlad stepped into the clearing, his boot struck a nearly invisible wire stretched across the ground. Instantly, a net woven with silver threads dropped from the trees above, enveloping him in a tangled mesh designed to incapacitate warlock hunters and their tools.

"What the---" Vlad struggled against the net as Tandy's smile transformed into something colder, more calculating.

"Vampire hunter trap," she explained with clear pride.

"One of Ronald's more useful contributions.

The silver threads disrupt hunter magic.

" She circled Vlad like a realtor, showing a property's best features.

"I've been trying to get you alone since you arrived.

You're quite the obstacle to my commission structure. "

Vlad ceased struggling, assessing his situation with surprising calm. "Impressive, Ms. Keyes. Didn't think you had this kind of preparation in you."

"There's a lot you don't know about me," Tandy replied, retrieving a dagger from inside her jacket.

Unlike her usual flashy accessories, this weapon looked ancient.

"I'm not just some desperate realtor. I'm Ronald's chosen representative in Cauldron Falls.

His inside person. His favored business associate! "

"I see," Vlad nodded thoughtfully. "And that's why you're wearing his mark?" He gestured to her gold bracelet with its distinctive fang pattern.

Tandy's composure faltered slightly. "How did you---"

"Been hunting vampires for years, love. Ronald always marks his helpers. In Denver,

it was watches. In Phoenix, cufflinks. He likes to brand his possessions."

"I am not a possession," Tandy snapped, her professional veneer cracking.

"I'm the future Minister of Real Estate for Fangtasia Falls!

I have business cards already printed!" Her hand tightened around the dagger.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to ensure you don't interfere with tonight's ritual. "

As she raised the dagger, Vlad's demeanor shifted.

The theatrical hunter disappeared, replaced by something cunning and more efficient.

With one practiced movement, he activated a small device on his belt.

A blinding flash erupted, accompanied by a high-pitched whine that shattered the silver threads in the net.

"Years, Ms. Keyes, years," he repeated, untangling himself from the ruined trap. "Did you really think Ronald's outdated hunter trap would work on me?"

Tandy backed away, shock replacing triumph. "That's impossible! Ronald said the silver threads would neutralize any magic!"

"Ronald isn't exactly up to date on technology," Vlad replied, advancing toward her. "Now, about that dagger---"

Tandy turned and fled, sprinting back toward the cliff path with surprising speed for someone in three-inch heels. Vlad pursued, his longer strides quickly closing the distance between them. At the narrowest part of the path, with the sheer drop

yawning beside them, he caught her arm.

"Let go!" she shrieked, slashing wildly with the dagger. "Ronald sends his regards! That's what people say during assassinations, right? I saw it in a play once!"

When Vlad caught her wrist mid-strike, Tandy's desperation escalated. With her free hand, she made a sharp gesture toward his face, her fingers contorting into the configuration for a basic stunning spell.

"Obstupefacio!" she shouted, her face reddening with effort as she channeled all her meager energy into the spell.

A pathetic spark---no larger than a static electricity pop---fizzled from her fingertips, barely visible. It traveled approximately three inches before dissipating into nothing.

Vlad didn't even blink.

"Was that supposed to be magic?" he asked, genuine curiosity in his voice.

Tandy's face flushed with humiliation. "It works better indoors," she muttered, the lie transparent even to her own ears. "And with proper preparation. And during certain moon phases. And---"

"Save it," Vlad interrupted, not unkindly. "I've seen witches with limited abilities before. No shame in it. Plenty of successful people can't cast worth a damn."

"I'm not limited," Tandy insisted through gritted teeth. "I'm just... magically specialized. In real estate. That's a thing. It's very niche."

Vlad's expression showed he wasn't buying it, which only fueled Tandy's frustration. She tried to jerk away, resulting in their precarious struggle at the cliff edge.

"You know," Vlad said as they teetered on the brink, "Ronald's promises about the falls water enhancing your abilities? Another lie. Magical water can't create power where there's no foundation. At best, it would give you slightly stronger fizzles."

This revelation hit Tandy harder than any physical blow could have.

Vlad tried to pull them backwards, but Tandy fought with the desperation of someone who saw her dreams of redemption and vampire real estate dominance slipping away. They struggled at the cliff edge, loose rocks tumbling over into the abyss as their feet scuffed dangerously close to the drop.

"You'll kill us both!" Tandy screamed as she lost her footing, dragging Vlad perilously close to the edge. For a moment, they teetered on the brink, Vlad gripping Tandy's wrist while his other hand scrabbled for purchase on the rocky path.

"Then stop fighting!" he grunted, pulling them both back from the edge with considerable effort.

Tandy's heel caught on a rock, sending her sprawling onto the path with Vlad maintaining his grip on her wrist. The dagger clattered away, but her free hand plunged into her jacket pocket, emerging with a small vial of glowing orange liquid.

"One more step and I'll drop this!" she threatened, holding the vial over the cliff edge.

"It's Ronald's special formula---concentrated and highly volatile!

One drop in the falls water and it's permanently tainted---useless for anything but Ronald's purposes!

Although between us, it might just be spray tan with glitter added. He's very secretive about the formula."



"Ronald's cologne?" Vlad raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Planning to gas me into submission with eau de vampire?"

"It's not just cologne!" Tandy insisted, holding the vial over the cliff edge. "It's a binding agent. Or a claiming substance. Maybe an arcane territorial marker? To be honest, I wasn't really listening when he explained it. I was mentally calculating my commission on vampire vacation rentals."

"Clever. Insurance policy, is it?" Vlad said, still maintaining his grip.

"Call it leverage," Tandy countered, her business instincts resurfacing.

"Let me go and I'll save the falls. Try to take me in, and Cauldron Falls becomes a vampire hot tub, whether Ronald wins or not.

I've prepared a whole sales presentation for 'Fangtasia Falls'---complete with time-share options and a very competitive monthly maintenance fee structure! "

A tense standoff followed, with Tandy balanced precariously, Vlad still gripping her wrist, and the vial of orange liquid held directly over the drop.

"Here's the thing, Tandy," Vlad said, his voice surprisingly conversational. "I've spent my life hunting vampires and their helpers. Know what I've learned? Everyone thinks they've got leverage, until they don't."

With unexpected speed, he twisted her wrist, causing her to drop the dagger but not the vial. In the same motion, he pulled a silver whistle from his belt and blew a short, sharp note.

The response was immediate. From the trees above the path, a large raven swooped down, cawing loudly.

"AHH! BIRD ATTACK!" Tandy shrieked, instinctively ducking and losing her balance completely. She screamed as she began to fall backward---only to be yanked forward by Vlad's grip.

She collapsed onto the path, the vial still clutched in her trembling hand. Her designer suit was now covered in dust, and one of her acrylic nails (the one painted with a tiny house) had broken off.

"My familiar, Poe," Vlad explained, nodding to the raven, now perched on a nearby rock. "Been with me since Budapest. Excellent timing, as always."

The raven nodded and cawed in smug agreement.

"He's not much of a talker." Vlad smiled.

"You... you nearly killed me!" Tandy gasped, sprawled on the dirt path. "Do you have any idea how much this suit cost? It's my 'betray the town to vampires' outfit! Dry clean only!"

"No, you nearly killed yourself," Vlad corrected, carefully taking the vial from her unresisting fingers. "Always the way with Ronald's helpers---so eager to please him they don't see they've been set up to take the fall. Literally, in your case."

He examined the orange liquid critically. "This is just his tanning solution, with some fancy sparkles added. No magical properties whatsoever---except making vampires look ridiculous."

Tandy's face flushed with humiliation. "That's not possible! He told me it was a special formula---that it would taint the water and make it usable only for vampires!"

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"And you believed him," Vlad said, almost sympathetically. "Like the Denver developer believed him. And the Phoenix nightclub owner. And so many others before them."

"He promised me power," Tandy said, her voice suddenly small.

"Do you know what it's like to be a witch who can barely light a candle in a town of magical elites?

Plus, he promised me exclusive selling rights to all vampire properties!

Do you know what kind of commission that is over an eternity?

I could finally afford to travel. To live anywhere. Anywhere but here!"

"So, you decided to help vampires take over?" Vlad asked, maintaining his hold on her.

"A vampire resort would have meant prosperity," Tandy insisted, a manic gleam entering her eyes. "And I had the perfect slogan: 'Tandy Keyes, Vampire Real Estate Queen!' I'd already designed new business cards with little coffins on them and everything!"

"At what cost?" Vlad asked quietly. "Ronald doesn't share power, Tandy. Once he has what he wants, his helpers become the first course at the victory feast."

This revelation hit Tandy like a physical blow. She had suspected Ronald might not

keep all his promises, but she'd convinced herself that her usefulness would protect her.

"BUT HE MADE ME A GOLD brACELET!" she wailed, holding up her wrist to display the gaudy accessory with its distinctive fang pattern. "He called me his 'favorite real estate witch'! He said I'd be 'Minister of Real Estate' in the new vampire order! I was going to have underlings!"

"Minister of Real Estate?" Vlad repeated, unable to hide his amusement. "That's not even a real position."

"It would have been!" Tandy insisted. "I was going to have a special name plaque for my desk and everything!"

"Now," Vlad said, pulling her to her feet, "you're going to tell me exactly what Ronald is planning for tonight. Details. Start with how many vampires and where they'll enter town."

Tandy hesitated, then slumped in defeat. "He's bringing fifteen vampires. They'll enter from the north, following the creek that flows from the falls. He needs to perform a ritual in the town square precisely when the blood moon reaches its apex."

"And what does this ritual involve?"

"Creating a magical claim to the territory," Tandy explained. "He needs to mark Cauldron Falls as vampire territory during the blood moon. That's why the timing is so important."

"Anything else I should know?" Vlad pressed.

Tandy hesitated again, then blurted. "There's something I didn't tell him. Something I

found in the Falls family journal that I stole. The water won't work properly unless the ritual is performed with respect for the falls' magic. It has to be done with reverence, not domination."

"Which means forcing a takeover would backfire," Vlad concluded.

"Yes," Tandy admitted. "The journal was very specific. The falls respond to intention. If the ritual is performed with destructive intent, the water could actually harm vampires rather than help them."

"And Ronald doesn't know this?"

"No," Tandy said. "I thought... I thought I could use it as leverage later. To make myself indispensable. And maybe negotiate a better commission percentage."

Vlad considered this information, his mind working quickly. "One last thing---does he have some way to neutralize the town's magical defenses?"

Tandy nodded, defeated. "Anti-magic powder. The same substance I used on the cross. He has enough to create a pathway through any defensive barrier. And..." she hesitated.

"And?"

"And he has hostages. Hikers he captured near his mountain hideout. He'll use them as leverage or... food, if things go wrong. Though he promised the 'food' part was just a last resort. He said vampire resorts have very strict ethical standards these days. They're trying to improve their image."

Vlad released her wrist, but maintained a cautious distance. "Alright, Ms. Keyes. Here's what happens now. You're going to return to town with me. You'll be taken

into custody, and you'll repeat everything you've just told me to Detective O'Reilly."

"And then what? Salem?" Tandy asked bitterly. "Will they at least let me keep my real estate license? Maybe I could sell to imprisoned witches? There's a niche market!"

"That's not my decision," Vlad replied. "But cooperating now might help your case."

As they made their way back along the cliff path, the sun began its descent toward the horizon. In a few hours, the blood moon would rise, and Ronald would make his move.

"There's one thing I don't understand," Tandy said as they walked. "How did you know it was me? What gave me away? Was it my impeccable taste in vampire-adjacent jewelry? My vision board with 'Future Vampire Resort Sales Queen' written on it in glitter?"

Vlad glanced at her with something almost like pity. "Professional vampire hunter, love. I've seen this play out too many times. But if you want specifics---you knew too much. You were too eager to help."

He reached out and touched her gold bracelet, which she'd been nervously twisting throughout their confrontation. "And most telling... again, Ronald gives all his collaborators a gift. He marks his people, can't help himself. Vampire vanity."

Tandy stared at the bracelet in horror. "I thought it was our bond. I thought I was special! I also thought no one else would notice. The fangs are so tiny."

"You're all special, but not really," Vlad said quietly. "That's the thing about deals with vampires. The fine print'll kill you every time."

As they approached the edge of town, the sky took on an ominous red tint.

The blood moon was coming, and with it, Ronald Bitterhump and his vampire coven.

Thanks to Tandy's confession, they now knew exactly what they were facing---but would it be enough to save Cauldron Falls from becoming a vampire resort with questionable commission structures?

"One more thing," Vlad said as they walked. "Roam shared Evangelina's research with me---the fragments she discovered before her death. Smart woman, that one."

"What research?" Tandy asked, suddenly alert despite her dejection.

"About the falls water needing to be freely given," Vlad explained, watching her reaction carefully. "Evangelina figured out what you were hiding from Ronald---that the water would be useless if taken by force."

"That's why you're so confident," Tandy realized, her shoulders slumping further. "You're not just planning to fight Ronald---you're going to use the water against him."

"With Maisie's help," Vlad confirmed. "A witch with a direct connection to the falls, giving the water freely, but with protective intent. Exactly what Evangelina's research suggested would work."

"And you let me tell you all about Ronald's plans," Tandy groaned. "I've betrayed him twice over now."

"Look at it this way," Vlad said, as they reached the town limits. "You're finally doing something to help Cauldron Falls instead of selling it out. Evangelina would appreciate the irony."

Tandy had no response to that. In her mind, she could almost see her "Minister of Real Estate" name plaque dissolving like Ronald's spray tan in a rainstorm.

What about the dagger?" Tandy asked sullenly. "It looked pretty deadly to me. All silvery and pointy."

"Not actually a vampire weapon," Vlad informed her with a hint of amusement. "That's a prop dagger from 'Nightfall: Vampire Chronicles'---that cheesy TV show about teenage vampires. The production company sells them at fan conventions."

Tandy's face flushed crimson. "That can't be right. Ronald gave it to me himself! He said it was an ancient vampire artifact passed down through seventeen generations of Bitterhump vampires!"

"Ronald has a collection of them," Vlad confirmed. "He's the show's biggest fan. Even tried to get a guest appearance as 'Ancient Vampire Elder' in season three. They turned him down because his tan was too orange."

This final humiliation was almost too much for Tandy. All her plans, her ambitions, her dreams of power and respect---reduced to a cheap prop dagger, a gaudy bracelet, and a fake job title that sounded like something from a child's make-believe game.

"At least tell me that the eternal vampire resort commission was a real thing," she pleaded. "Was anything he told me true?"

"Well," Vlad considered, "vampires do tend to be wealthy due to compound interest over centuries. That part's true."

Tandy perked up slightly. "So, the commission potential was real!"

"Except vampires are notoriously stingy clients," Vlad added. "Four hundred years of



hoarding tends to make them very reluctant to part with money. Most vampire real estate agents end up working for blood payments instead."

"Blood payments?!" Tandy gasped, horrified. "But I hate needles! And I look terrible pale!"

As they entered the town, Tandy's grand dreams of vampire real estate dominance lay in ruins around her.

No fancy name plaque. No eternal commission.

Just the prospect of a cell in the Salem Magical Correctional Facility and the knowledge that she'd betrayed her town for what amounted to empty promises and cheap merchandise.

Vlad's expression hardened as he considered the coming battle. He'd faced Ronald multiple times before and failed to stop him permanently. Tonight would be different. It had to be.

"I don't suppose," Tandy ventured as they approached the town hall, "that there's any chance of a good character reference for the real estate licensing board? No? Worth a shot."

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Cuffed and Stuffed

Word had spread throughout Cauldron Falls that the vampire hunter had arrived and captured the villain. A crowd gathered in the town square, eager to catch a glimpse of both the legendary Vlad Marcum and the disgraced Tandy Keyes.

Marty Tuey's protest had grown slightly larger, now featuring enchanted signs that flashed slogans like "Vampire Panic = Economic Damage" and "Fact-Check Your Fears!"

"Directly opposite, a counter-demonstration led by Gwen Lewis and several other older witches brandished garlic bundles and chanted protective spells, their voices rising and falling in ancient rhythms that seemed to resonate with the very stones beneath their feet.

In the center of it all stood Tandy Keyes, handcuffed and surrounded by Shifter guards.

"This is completely unnecessary," she complained, jangling her handcuffs.

"These clash terribly with my outfit! Couldn't we use something more fashionable?

Maybe rose gold? Or at least something that doesn't completely ruin my professional image? "

Roam O'Reilly stood nearby. His expression grim, as he reviewed Vlad's report. "Your professional image was ruined when you tried to stab a vampire hunter and

confessed to murdering our town's dark creatures expert, Ms. Keyes."

"Allegedly tried to stab," Tandy corrected. "And it wasn't even a real vampire weapon! Just a TV prop! That should count for something, right? Like attempted murder with reduced dramatic effect?"

The crowd of onlookers grew as word spread that Tandy Keyes had been arrested as Ronald's accomplice. The look of betrayal on their faces was unmistakable---this wasn't some outside threat but one of their own who had plotted against them.

"I can explain everything," Tandy announced to the gathering townsfolk. "It was all a big misunderstanding! I was engaging in speculative real estate development with an unusual demographic! It's called niche marketing!"

No one looked convinced.

Leahnora Loveridge approached Tandy with an expression of profound disappointment.

"Tandy Keyes," she said, her voice carrying throughout the hall. "Vlad Marcum has provided evidence of your collaboration with Ronald Bitterhump. We have recovered Evangelina's records from your office, along with Ronald's communications and the anti-magic formula used on the cross."

Tandy straightened her shoulders, attempting to salvage some dignity.

"Mayor Loveridge, may I just point out that vampire real estate is an emerging market with tremendous growth potential.

I was simply positioning Cauldron Falls for inevitable industry expansion. It's called being ahead of the curve!"

Honey and Roam exchanged incredulous glances.

"You murdered Evangelina Coal," Roam stated flatly.

"I facilitated an unfortunate property rezoning via structural accident," Tandy corrected primly. "That's the proper real estate terminology."

Leahnora's expression hardened. "We will be conducting a full investigation, but the evidence is overwhelming. You will be transported to the Salem Correctional Facility for Magical Offenses pending trial."

"Salem?" Tandy gasped. "But their real estate market is terrible!

All those witch trial tourists drive up prices while creating unsustainable seasonal demand fluctuations!

"She paused, considering. "Although, I suppose the prison itself represents an untapped selling opportunity. Captive audience, quite literally."

"This isn't about real estate, Ms. Keyes," Leahnora said firmly. "This is about betrayal and murder."

"Can't it be about both?" Tandy asked hopefully. "I'm excellent at multi-tasking. I'll make new business cards: 'Tandy Keyes: Multi-Tasking Property Specialist.' I could sell prison cells between court appearances!"

Throughout this exchange, Vlad stood by the window, keeping watch. The blood moon was rising, and despite Tandy's capture, Ronald was still coming.

"Mayor Loveridge," he interrupted. "While I hate to cut short Ms. Keyes' career planning session, we need to prepare for Ronald's arrival."

"Yes, about that," Tandy perked up. "I have extensive notes on Ronald's aesthetic preferences for the resort.

He's very particular about color schemes---everything must coordinate with his spray tan.

Burnt orange is his signature color, though I've suggested a more subdued palette for the formal dining areas---"

"Ms. Keyes, nice try but drop it," Leahnora cut her off. "The resort will never happen."

"What happens now?" she asked, looking suddenly lost, her ambitions of a vampire real estate empire evaporated before her eyes.

"Now you tell us everything you know about Ronald's plans," Roam said firmly. "Every detail that might help us protect the town."

Tandy hesitated, then straightened her shoulders. If she couldn't be Vampire Real Estate Queen, perhaps she could salvage something by cooperating.

"Ronald has maps of all the underground water channels," she began. "He's planning to enter from the north side of the falls. He has fifteen vampires with him."

As Tandy shared what she knew, the town officials gathered around, taking notes and adjusting their defense strategies. Even in handcuffs, she couldn't help slipping into her professional presentation mode.

"The ritual must be performed at the apex," she explained, gesturing as much as her restraints allowed. "Ronald is very specific about timing. He gets quite annoying about it, honestly."

"And the anti-magic powder?" Vlad prompted.

"He has enough to create a pathway through standard magical barriers," Tandy confirmed.

"But not enough for the entire town. It's quite expensive---cuts into the profit margins terribly.

I suggested a more cost-effective alternative, but he's oddly attached to his orange-tinted versions of everything. "

As she continued providing details, Leahnora signaled to several officials at the back of the hall. They nodded and slipped out, presumably to strengthen the town's defenses based on the new information.

"As I told Vlad, the one thing Ronald doesn't know," Tandy added, lowering her voice conspiratorially, "is that the falls water only works if it's freely given. I found that in the journal I stole. If taken by force, it could actually harm vampires rather than help them."

"And why didn't you tell him this?" Honey asked, surprised.

"Well, I was saving it for contract negotiations," Tandy admitted. "Thought it might help me negotiate a higher commission percentage. I was thinking 7.5% is fair for eternity, don't you think? Not too greedy?"

Roam shook his head in disbelief. "You were willing to let Ronald take over the town, but you held back information that could help him because you wanted a better commission rate?"

"It's called business leverage," Tandy sniffed. "Standard practice in high-stakes

negotiations."

A commotion at the door interrupted them. One of the Shifter guards entered, looking alarmed.

"Scout report from the northern perimeter," he announced. "Multiple bat sightings. They're coming earlier than expected."

"Ronald never could read a lunar chart properly," Tandy muttered. "His timing was always off by at least twenty minutes at our planning meetings. Very unprofessional."

Leahnora turned to Roam. "Get her to the secured holding cell. We'll deal with her fully after we've handled Ronald."

As two Shifter guards moved to lead Tandy away, she suddenly called out, "Wait! I can help! I know Ronald's weaknesses!"

Vlad raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"He's pathologically vain about his hair piece," Tandy explained rapidly.

"Completely loses focus if it's threatened.

And his spray tan? He keeps touch-up bottles in his pockets at all times.

If they're damaged, he has absolute meltdowns.

I once saw him abandon an entire meeting because someone spilled water on his sleeve and his tan started to streak. "

The assembled town officials exchanged glances. This was certainly unusual tactical

information, but it might prove useful.

"Also," Tandy continued, warming to her subject, "he has this ridiculous catchphrase he insists on using whenever he makes a big entrance: 'Ronald has entered the building!' He practices it for hours. If you interrupt it or don't react properly, he gets completely thrown off script."

"Anything else?" Roam asked, signaling the guards to wait.

"Yes!" Tandy nodded enthusiastically. "He's terrified of fashion critics!

Absolutely petrified! There's a vampire fashion critic named Count Federico who once called Ronald's style 'aggressively tasteless' in 1989, and Ronald still has nightmares about it.

Just mentioning Federico's name could distract him. "

Vlad looked thoughtful. "This might actually be useful. Count Federico is currently the Chief Justice of the Transylvanian Tribunal."

"He is?" Tandy gasped. "Oh, Ronald will hate that! Federico once said Ronald's choice of gold accessories made him look like 'a pawnshop that gained sentience.' Ronald cried for days!"

Despite the gravity of the situation, several people had to suppress smiles at this image.

"Take her to the holding cell until we need her," Leahnora instructed the guards. "And send for the Salem transport. They should arrive by dawn."

As Tandy was led away, she called back over her shoulder, "If anyone wants to list



their property before the vampire attack potentially decreases market values, I'm still technically licensed until my hearing! Special end-of-the-world rates available!"

The guards exchanged exasperated glances as they escorted her out.

Once Tandy was gone, Leahnora turned to address the assembled townsfolk.

"Citizens of Cauldron Falls, the threat we face tonight is real.

Ronald Bitterhump and his vampire coven are coming to claim our town and our falls.

But now, thanks to Ms. Keyes' cooperation---however self-serving it may be---we know what to expect and how to prepare. "

As they began organizing defensive positions throughout town, Vlad approached Roam and Honey.

"That woman is something else," he commented, shaking his head. "Twenty years hunting vampires, and I've never met an accomplice quite so..."

"Shallow?" Honey suggested.

"Commission-focused?" Roam offered.

"I was going to say 'on-brand,'" Vlad chuckled. "Even facing imprisonment for murder, she's still trying to sell properties."

In a few hours, Ronald Bitterhump would arrive expecting to claim Cauldron Falls as his vampire resort. Instead, he would find a town united against him, armed with knowledge of his ridiculous weaknesses and prepared to defend their home.

And in her holding cell, Tandy Keyes was already drafting plans on a napkin for a new business venture: "Reformed Villain Properties---Specializing in Second Chance Real Estate for the Magically Incarcerated.

" There might not be vampire commission in her future, but there was always a new market to explore.

Perhaps they'd let her keep her license on probation?

"Prison consultant does have a certain ring to it," she mused, adding "Corner office with barred windows?" to her notes. "I could make this work!"

### Fang-tastic Failure

Ronald made his grand entrance. He had insisted on a dramatic approach---his vampire coven moving in formation behind him as he strutted down Main Street toward the town square, arms spread wide like a supernatural game show host.

"Citizens of Cauldron Falls! Ronald has entered the building!" he announced to the seemingly deserted streets. "Your new proprietor has arrived! Resistance is futile, but also unnecessary! Under my management, things will be great. Really, really great!"

Ronald had dressed for what he considered appropriate vampire resort-owner style---leather pants too tight for his pudgy frame, a silk shirt open to reveal his pale chest adorned with gold chains, and his prized leather jacket with "Bite Me" bedazzled across the back in rhinestones.

His blonde comb-over had been freshly styled and heavily lacquered to withstand the night air, and his skin glowed with an unnatural orange luminescence that made him look like a traffic cone that had achieved consciousness.

From Tab's Café, Marty Tuey and his former skeptical followers watched in stunned silence as the procession of actual vampires passed by their window. Marty's protest sign reading "Vampire Panic = Economic Damage" slipped from his nerveless fingers.

"Is that... is that a vampire with a fake tan?" one of his supporters whispered in horrified fascination.

"And a bedazzled jacket," another added faintly.

Marty's worldview crumbled before his eyes. "Vampires are really real," he murmured. "And they have terrible fashion sense."

Behind Ronald, his coven moved with less enthusiasm than their leader.

Most were newly turned---former tourists from Ronald's last failed venture in Denver---and their control over their vampire abilities was tenuous at best. They looked nervously at the seemingly empty town, sensing something wasn't right about this easy entrance.

At the rear of the procession, several vampires guarded a small group of human captives---hikers with terrified expressions who stumbled forward with their hands bound.

From hidden positions throughout town, Cauldron Falls' defenders watched the vampire procession.

Roam, positioned on a rooftop with several Shifter officers, signaled to teams stationed at strategic points.

Honey and Leahnora monitored from the town hall, ready to activate the magical barriers when needed.

In the town square, Tandy waited nervously.

As part of the trap, she had been seemingly "freed" from custody, positioned to lead Ronald into the prepared ambush.

Her role as bait wasn't voluntary, but with magical restraints hidden beneath her

sleeve that prevented her from warning Ronald, she had little choice.

When Ronald swept into the square, his coven arrayed behind him and his captives guarded at the rear, Tandy hurried forward with an ingratiating smile.

"Ronald! Thank goodness you've come! I've prepared everything just as you---"

"Tandy Keyes," Ronald interrupted coldly. "My loyal real estate agent. Or not so loyal, considering your capture."

"That wasn't my fault!" Tandy protested. "That vampire hunter---Vlad Marcum---he tricked me!"

At the mention of Vlad's name, Ronald's orange complexion paled slightly. "Marcum is still here? In Cauldron Falls?"

"Yes, but I've evaded him," Tandy assured him quickly. "The square is prepared for your ritual. I've made sure of it."

The blood moon reached its zenith, bathing the town square in crimson light. Ronald stepped into the center of his vampire circle, raising his arms dramatically.

"I, Ronald Bitterhump, claim this territory and its magical waters in the name of the Eternal Night Vacation Consortium!"

Leahnora gave the signal, and Honey and Maisie activated the enhanced falls water, creating a shimmering blue barrier that encircled the vampire coven. The water's magical properties, freely given by Cauldron Falls' protectors rather than stolen, glowed with power against the undead intruders.

But as the barrier formed, one of Ronald's vampires stepped forward, removing a

small vial from his coat. With practiced precision, he hurled it at the water barrier. The vial shattered, releasing a cloud of shimmering orange powder.

"Excellent work!" Ronald crowed, his confidence returning. "See? This is why I'm the best vampire entrepreneur! I hire people who prepare for contingencies!"

Where the powder touched the barrier, the water hissed and dissipated, creating a widening hole in the town's primary defense. Several vampires immediately leapt through the gap, seizing two of the Shifter guards and dragging them back into the circle.

Panic rippled through the defenders as their supposedly impenetrable barrier failed. From his position on the rooftop, Roam signaled desperately to Miles Montgomery, who scrambled to activate the backup light crystals.

"The barrier's failing!" Gloria cried out, clutching her anti-vampire powder sachets uselessly. "They're getting through!"

Maisie, seeing their primary defense collapsing, closed her eyes and reached deeper into her connection with the falls. Unlike her previous controlled channeling, she now opened herself completely to the water's magic, becoming a conduit for its raw power.

"Maisie, wait!" Honey called, recognizing what her sister was attempting. "That's too much---you could hurt yourself!"

But Maisie was already immersed in the water's consciousness, her body beginning to shimmer with blue light as the falls responded to her desperation.

Water suddenly erupted from every fountain, hydrant, and well in the square---not in the controlled streams they had planned, but in powerful jets that shot toward the

vampires from all directions.

Ronald, mid-gloat about his imminent victory, was struck directly in the face by a particularly forceful water spout. His spray tan began to dissolve in orange rivulets down his face and neck.

"My tan!" Ronald shrieked, "Do you have any idea how long the application process takes?"

The vampires who had breached the barrier found themselves being pushed back by walls of water that seemed to target them individually.

One particularly unfortunate vampire was lifted completely off his feet by an upward-shooting fountain and deposited, sputtering and humiliated, back in the center of the circle.

Ronald was further compromised when his hair situation finally detached completely from his mostly bald head. The heavily lacquered hair piece flopped onto his shoulder like a dead animal, revealing a pale, shiny scalp, and two wisps of white hair.

A collective gasp rose from the assembled vampires and townsfolk. Even Vlad seemed momentarily stunned by the sight.

"That's..." he began, struggling to find words.

"Horrifying," Bartie supplied, having flown down to perch on Maisie's shoulder as she joined Honey at the edge of the square.

Ronald, realizing his carefully constructed image was literally falling apart, made a desperate grab for his hair piece, attempting to reattach it while simultaneously trying to maintain his threatening vampire demeanor.

"This changes nothing!" he declared, his voice rising to an undignified squeak. "I am still Ronald Bitterhump, future ruler of the most exclusive vampire resort in North America!"

But his credibility, like his comb-over, had irreparably slipped. The newly turned vampires looked uncertain, their faith in their leader visibly shaking as water continued to pummel them from all directions.

Meanwhile, the captured Shifters took advantage of the confusion to break free, transforming into their animal forms---a mountain lion and a wolf---and bounding to safety through the chaos of spraying water and disoriented vampires.

Vlad, who had been positioned to deploy his specialized vampire-hunting equipment if needed, lowered his crossbow and simply watched the spectacle with amused appreciation.

"Sometimes," he remarked to Roam as they observed from the rooftop, "the best vampire defense is just good old-fashioned humiliation."

Below them, Ronald was having a complete meltdown, alternately trying to reattach his sodden hairpiece and wipe the streaming orange from his face and neck.

"This is impossible!" he wailed, holding his dripping toupee like a dead animal. "This was supposed to be my triumphant moment!"

As the water's assault continued, the vampires found themselves being herded back together in the center of the square, effectively contained once more.

Maisie, still glowing with blue light, guided the water to reform the barrier around them, this time creating a dome that completely enclosed the vampires from above as well.



"This is bad for my hair and my brand!" Ronald moaned, looking utterly defeated as his coven huddled miserably in the center of the water dome, all of them soaked and several sporting orange spray tan stains transferred from their leader during the chaos.

With the immediate threat contained, Miles finally activated his light crystals, which exploded in blinding flashes around the square. The trapped vampires howled in pain, covering their eyes.

Vlad descended from the rooftop, landing gracefully in front of the contained vampires. "Ronald Bitterhump, for crimes against magical communities and crimes against fashion, you are hereby under arrest."

Ronald's desperation grew as he watched his followers' fear and his plans disintegrating. "This isn't over, Marcum!"

"It is for your resort schemes," Vlad replied cheerfully. "Though I do hope we meet again. You're my favorite vampire to thwart."

As the Shifters began escorting the vampire coven and their leader out of town, Tandy made one last desperate attempt to salvage something from the disaster.

"Ronald! What about our agreement? The exclusive selling rights?"

Ronald turned back, his expression a mixture of disdain and embarrassment. "Selling rights to what, exactly? There is no resort, Tandy. There never will be. And your commissions exist only in your imagination---just like my hair."

With that devastating parting shot, Ronald was led away. His vampire resort dreams permanently shattered, leaving Tandy standing alone in the square, surrounded by the community she had betrayed.

Marty Tuey and his former skeptics had emerged from Tab's Café, their worlds completely rearranged by what they had witnessed. Marty approached Tandy with an expression of profound disappointment.

"You were going to sell our town to... that?" He gestured toward the departing Ronald, who was still trying unsuccessfully to reattach his toupee. "A spray tanned vampire with a bad toupee and a bedazzler?"

As the blood moon waned, its crimson light fading from Cauldron Falls, the town's residents gathered in the square. After erasing the memories and transporting the humans back to civilization, all the dangers had passed. The vampires were defeated without a single casualty.

For now, Cauldron Falls was safe from vampire resorts, bad toupees, and orange spray tans.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Morning Glory (No More Gory)

Cauldron Falls awakened to a brilliant morning, the events of the blood moon night already transforming into the stuff of town legends.

Shop owners removed garlic strands from their doorways, magical barriers were dismantled, and the community began the process of returning to normal---or as normal as a magical town could be.

At The Boozy Cauldron, Murphy O'Reilly served breakfast to a packed house, everyone eager to share their version of the previous night's excitement.

"I saw the whole thing," Gloria announced to anyone who would listen, her flaming red curls even more untamed than usual. "When that vampire's hair piece fell off, I nearly died!"

"Not as funny as the spray tan running down his neck," Colin Scott countered, sliding into the booth beside her. "Looked like he'd been dunked in pumpkin juice."

Blewy, Gloria's Russian Blue familiar, sniffed disdainfully from his perch on a nearby stool. "The sparkled leather jacket was the true crime against fashion. 'Bite Me' in rhinestones? Seriously?"

The Salem Magical Authority transport had arrived just before dawn, a sleek black carriage pulled by winged horses that left no tracks.

The six vampire enforcement agents---stern witches and warlocks in crisp gray

uniforms with silver badges---had efficiently loaded Ronald and his coven into containment chambers specially designed for transporting the undead.

"This is an outrage!" Ronald had bellowed as they secured his hands with silver cuffs. "Do you have any idea who I am? I'm Ronald Bitterhump, future owner of the most exclusive vampire resort in North America!"

"Actually, sir," the lead agent had replied while consulting her paperwork, "you're Ronald Bitterhump, three-time violator of the Vampire-Witch Coexistence Treaty, unlicensed resort developer, and unauthorized tanning bed user.

The Transylvanian Tribunal has a whole file cabinet dedicated to your violations. "

Those who witnessed the transport couldn't stop discussing the vampire's reaction to learning his fate. The once-feared Ronald, stripped of his toupee and with his spray tan streaking his silk shirt, had looked significantly less intimidating in the morning light.

"Did you see his face when they told him the Tribunal's Chief Justice is Count Federico, the vampire fashion critic he insulted at the 1989 Midnight Gala?" Dottie Darwin asked her sister Darlene, both giggling like schoolgirls. "Went paler than a vampire should!"

As for Tandy Keyes, she had been escorted to a separate transport---a modest carriage bound for the Salem Correctional Facility for Magical Offenses.

Unlike Ronald's dramatic protests, Tandy had approached her fate with surprising composure, pausing only to hand out business cards to the bemused transport officers.

"Tandy Keyes, Future Prison Real Estate Consultant," the cards read. "Specializing in Cell Upgrades and Incarceration Interior Design."

"I've identified a serious market gap," she'd explained enthusiastically to anyone who would listen.

"Prison cell aesthetics are tragically neglected!

With just a few simple modifications---accent pillows, coordinated wall hangings, strategic furniture placement---even the most dismal holding cell can become a 'desirable detention domicile'! "

Her last words before the transport left were, "If anyone's looking for reasonably priced properties in my absence, Robyn's Realty in Assjacket has a fair commission structure---though obviously inferior to my own special rates!"

She'd spent the journey sketching designs for a vision board titled "Post-Incarceration Empire: The Comeback Tour" and drafting a prison newsletter column called "Sell Block Tips with Tandy.

" The Salem guards later reported that her first request upon arrival wasn't for a lawyer, but for better lighting "to properly showcase cell features during potential showings. "

The Magical Tribunal had scheduled her trial for the following month, though rumors suggested she was already attempting to broker deals with other prisoners, offering to "optimize their cell's feng shui for a small consulting fee."

The door to the pub swung open, and Honey and Maisie entered to a round of spontaneous applause. The sisters had spent the night at the falls, reinforcing the protection spells that had proven so effective against the vampire coven.

"There they are!" Murphy called proudly. "The sisters who helped save our town!"

Maisie blushed, looking surprised at the warm reception. Though still showing signs of her ordeal---she occasionally startled at sudden movements, but the overall difference in her demeanor was remarkable. She walked with more confidence, made eye contact, and when she smiled, it reached her eyes.

"Morning, heroes," Vlad greeted them cheerfully, tipping his hat. "Ready for a victory breakfast? Murphy's serving 'Vampire Vanquisher Pancakes' with extra garlic. Bit much for breakfast, if you ask me, but the town's in a celebratory mood."

"How are the containment spells holding up at the falls?" Roam asked as the sisters sat down.

"Strong," Honey confirmed. "Maisie's connection with the water is remarkable. She's reinforced the natural protections so effectively that vampires won't be able to approach the water for at least a century."

Maisie shrugged modestly. "The falls wanted to be protected. I just helped them express that intention."

"That's quite the talent," Vlad observed. "Water witches are rare, especially ones who can communicate with magical water sources."

"Speaking of talent," Roam said, "that was quick thinking with the falls water last night. I've never seen vampires move backward so fast."

Maisie smiled at the memory.

"The spray tan was never waterproof," Bartie explained from his perch on Maisie's shoulder. "That's why he was so paranoid about rain. One good shower and the whole illusion washes away."

Uma arrived with plates of pancakes, Allen following with a pitcher of syrup balanced impressively on his back.

"Eat up," Uma instructed. "Dad's adding 'Ronald's Ridiculous Resort Rejection' to our town celebration calendar. Annual festival with fake tans and bad wigs optional."

The table erupted in laughter, the tension of the previous days finally breaking. Even Maisie joined in, her laugh tentative but genuine.

"What will happen to Ronald now?" she asked after a moment, her expression betraying lingering concern.

"The Tribunal takes treaty violations very seriously," Vlad explained, pouring generous amounts of syrup on his pancakes.

"He'll face multiple charges: unauthorized territory claims, improper use of vampire abilities on humans, operating an unlicensed blood collection system, and---perhaps most seriously in vampire society---'bringing ridicule upon the dignity of the undead' with his fashion choices. "

"That's a real charge?" Honey asked, surprised.

"Oh yes," Vlad nodded solemnly. "Vampires are incredibly image conscious. Ronald's spray tan and over the top clothes have been a source of collective embarrassment for decades. The Tribunal has been looking for an excuse to rein him in."

The conversation was interrupted when Leahnora Loveridge entered the pub. The room quieted as she made her way to their table.

"Good morning," she greeted them formally. "I thought you should know that Tandy

Keyes has been transported to the Salem Correctional Facility for Magical Offenses. Her trial will begin next month."

The patrons of the pub took the news in with a collective sigh. It was over.

Leahnora turned to Maisie. "I've been reviewing our town records. It seems we have an opening for a Water Management Specialist---someone to oversee the falls and our other magical water resources. Given your unique abilities, the position is yours if you want it."

Maisie's eyes widened in surprise. "Me? But I---I've only just arrived. And I don't even know if I'm staying..." She glanced uncertainly at Honey.

"Of course you're staying," Honey said firmly. "You belong here. With me."

"And me!" Bartie added indignantly. "I've filed all the proper familiar registration paperwork. We're officially bonded now, so wherever you go, I go." He puffed out his tiny chest proudly. "Besides, I've grown rather fond of this ridiculous town."

Maisie looked around the table---at her sister, at Bartie, at the new friends who had helped her rebuild her life---and something shifted in her expression. The last vestiges of uncertainty fell away, replaced by the quiet confidence of someone who had finally found her place.

"I'd be honored to accept the position," she told Leahnora. "The falls helped save me as much as I helped them. It seems fitting to return the favor."

"Excellent," Leahnora nodded approvingly. "You'll start next week. For now, enjoy the celebration. You've earned it."

As Leahnora departed, the conversation at the table turned to more practical matters.



"I'll need to find my own place," Maisie realized. "I can't keep sleeping on your couch forever."

"Actually," Honey began hesitantly, "I've been thinking about that."

FACTS & FIBS is too big for just me, especially with most of the familiar quarters empty since the last matching day.

There's the east wing that I never use---it could be your own apartment, with a separate entrance and everything. "

"You wouldn't mind?" Maisie asked, sounding both hopeful and uncertain. "I know I still have... issues." She gestured vaguely, encompassing the nightmares, the occasional panic attacks, the lingering trauma from her captivity.

"Of course I wouldn't mind," Honey assured her. "You're my sister. Besides, Leahnora recommended a wonderful magical trauma specialist in Assjacket. Having your own space while still being close by seems like the perfect arrangement."

"And I get my own bat house, correct?" Bartie interjected. "With proper ventilation and southern exposure? I refuse to hang in some dreary attic like a common household bat."

"Obviously," Honey laughed. "We'd need to meet your exacting standards."

As they finalized their plans over breakfast, Vlad checked his weathered pocket watch and sighed. "I should be heading out soon. Vampire hunters never rest for long."

"You're leaving?" Maisie asked, sounding disappointed.

"Got reports of unusual activity in Montana," Vlad explained. "Probably nothing, but worth checking out."

"Will you come back to visit?" Honey asked. "You're welcome anytime."

"Count on it," Vlad promised, tipping his hat. "I make a point of checking in on the towns I've helped. Besides, your annual 'Ronald's Ridiculous Resort Rejection' festival sounds too entertaining to miss."

He rose to leave, collecting his massive equipment bag from beside the booth. "Take care of yourselves. Especially you," he added to Maisie. "You've got real spirit, surviving what you did and still finding the strength to fight back. That's rare."

Maisie blushed at the compliment, but managed a smile. "Thank you. For everything."

As Vlad made his way toward the door, stopping to accept handshakes and back-slaps from grateful townspeople, Honey turned to her sister.

"How are you really doing?" she asked quietly. "With everything that's happened?"

Maisie considered the question seriously.

"I'm... healing," she said finally. "There are still memories I can't fully access, nightmares I can't shake."

I still flinch at sudden movements sometimes, and I don't think I'll ever enjoy fashion shows.

" Her attempt at humor was undercut by a shadow in her eyes, but she continued more firmly.

"But I'm finding parts of myself I thought were gone forever.

My connection to water. My ability to trust. My name. "

She touched the silver pendant around her neck, the one that had helped her find her way to Honey. "For so long, I was just 'the witch' to them. A tool. A test subject. Now I'm Maisie again. And I'm discovering what that means."

"You're also 'Bunny' to me," Honey reminded her gently, using the childhood nickname that had resurfaced in her recovered memories.

"Right," Maisie smiled. "Maisie to the world, Bunny to you. I can live with that."

Across the pub, Dr. Clive Wimpleton had cornered Bartie by the fireplace, interrogating the bat about behavioral patterns for his research. The bat was answering with theatrical sighs and exaggerated patience, occasionally glancing toward Maisie as if to say, "The things I endure for you."

"Your familiar is quite the character," Roam observed, following her gaze.

"He saved my life," Maisie said simply. "Not just by helping me escape, but by reminding me that not everything about Ronald's world was evil. Some were just trapped, like me. Bartie helped me remember that kindness exists even in the darkest places."

"Well, there's plenty of kindness in Cauldron Falls," Roam assured her. "And if anyone gives you trouble about your time with the vampires, they'll have the Chief Inspector to deal with." His protective tone made Honey beam at him appreciatively.

As the breakfast celebration continued around them, Maisie allowed herself to relax fully for perhaps the first time since her escape.

The nightmares would likely continue for some time.

The trauma of her captivity wouldn't vanish overnight.

But here, surrounded by her sister and new friends, with Bartie's reassuring presence nearby and a community that had accepted her despite everything, Maisie felt something she had almost forgotten hope.

The Blood Moon had risen and fallen, Ronald Bitterhump was facing vampire justice, and Cauldron Falls was safe. But most importantly, the lost sisters had found each other again, their bond stronger than any vampire's influence or memory-altering magic.

Outside, the morning sun shone on the magical town, its light reflecting off the falls that had played such a crucial role in defeating the vampires.

The water danced and sparkled, seeming almost to celebrate along with the townspeople.

And if one looked closely at the falls---as Maisie could now, with her awakened water witch abilities---they might notice that the water flowed with particular vigor today, as if pleased with its role in saving the town and helping a lost witch find her way home.

As for Ronald Bitterhump, rumors would later reach Cauldron Falls that the Transylvanian Tribunal had sentenced him to a century of community service---specifically, maintaining the Tribunal's extensive gardens during daylight hours, equipped with only the strongest sunscreen and a wide-brimmed hat. No spray tan allowed.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:54 am*

### Epilogue: Grave Concerns

The moon cast its familiar glow over Cauldron Falls Cemetery, restored to its silvery luminescence. Butcher shuffled between the graves on his nightly rounds, his decaying joints creaking slightly as he bent to remove fallen leaves from a headstone.

"Evening, Mrs. Mills," he greeted in his gravelly voice. "Your grandson visited today. Brought those yellow daisies you always favored."

After the excitement of the vampire incident, the cemetery's peaceful quiet was a welcome return to normalcy. Yet something felt different tonight. The air held a subtle charge, reminiscent of the night Maisie had stumbled into his domain.

As he approached the freshly dug plot in the eastern corner, Butcher slowed his pace. The grave was still adorned with flowers from the funeral---beautifully arranged bouquets from Evangelina Coal's many grateful clients over her long existence.

"Evening, Ms. Coal," he murmured, adjusting a tilting arrangement of lilies. "Town's calmed down now. That vampire hunter fellow left yesterday, though he promised to check in regular-like."

"The town should stay vigilant," replied a crisp, familiar voice. "The danger never truly passes in places like Cauldron Falls."

Butcher didn't startle---after a lifetime in the cemetery, he was accustomed to the occasional conversational dead. He turned slowly to face the translucent form of Evangelina Coal, her spectral appearance maintaining the dignified bearing she'd held

in life.

"Ms. Coal," he acknowledged with a respectful nod. "Was wondering when you might show up."

Evangelina's ghost floated a few inches above the ground, her form shimmering faintly in the moonlight. "Death doesn't release one from responsibility, Butcher. Especially not in Cauldron Falls."

"How're you finding the afterlife?" he asked conversationally, continuing his rounds with the ghost drifting alongside him.

"Restrictive," she admitted with a touch of frustration. "Being bound to the cemetery unless invited elsewhere is... inconvenient for continued research."

Butcher nodded sympathetically. The rules for ghosts were well-established---they remained tethered to their final resting place unless specifically invited into locations. For someone as active and involved as Evangelina had been, it must be particularly challenging.

"I've been watching," she continued, gesturing toward the town visible beyond the cemetery gates. "The celebration, the relief. They think the threat has passed."

"Hasn't it?" Butcher questioned, pausing to straighten a tilted vase.

"From Ronald, most likely. But vampires may return someday. Different vampires, with different approaches."

Evangelina's spectral form shimmered with concern. "Before my death, I discovered something in the archives---records of vampire attempts spanning decades. Each failure teaches them new strategies. Ronald was crude, obvious. The next attempt will likely be more subtle."

She gestured toward a faint blue glow emanating from her grave. "I managed to preserve some of my research materials in a preservation spell. Among them is evidence that shows vampire interest in magical communities has been increasing for the past century."

Butcher tilted his head, considering this new information. "So, there'll be others?"

"Eventually," Evangelina confirmed. "A vampire who learns from Ronald's mistakes won't announce himself with spray tans and bedazzled jackets. He'll blend in, gain trust, work from within."

Her translucent hand passed through a headstone as she continued, "But that's at least a century away now."

And that's not the threat that concerns me most." She gazed toward the town, her eyes seeing beyond the physical realm.

"In all my time studying dark creatures, I've learned an important truth: darkness exists in all species, Butcher. Even within us."

They passed the oldest section of the cemetery, where the founding families rested. Butcher considered her words carefully. "What are you sensing?"

"Cauldron Falls draws power to it---both light and dark."

The falls' magic is a beacon." Her ghostly hand swept toward the distant sound of water.

"Such goodness and power inevitably will attract darkness."

Sometimes from the outside, like Ronald.

But sometimes..." She paused meaningfully, "...the darkness emerges from within."

"Within the town?" Butcher asked, his decaying brow furrowing.

"Within those we know. Those we trust." Evangelina's voice grew softer. "I sense something stirring, Butcher. Not vampires this time. Something closer to home."

They reached the cemetery gate, where Evangelina paused, unable to cross the boundary. The town beyond glittered with normal evening activities, residents having already begun to forget the narrow escape they'd had.

"I need your help," she said, her spectral form growing more serious. "I can't leave these grounds unless invited, but you can. I need you to be my eyes and ears in town. The Hadwin sisters have found each other, which is powerful magic in itself. But new threats will emerge."

"Always do in Cauldron Falls," Butcher agreed. "What exactly are we looking for?"

Evangelina shook her translucent head. "I'm uncertain yet. Just... changes. Behaviors that don't align with who we know people to be. Secrets being kept. The darkness can manifest in many ways---not always with fangs and ridiculous spray tans."

Despite the gravity of the conversation, Butcher's withered lips twitched in what might have been a smile. "I'll keep watch," he promised. "Decent at observing, I am. People don't much notice the cemetery zombie."

"That's precisely why you're perfect for this," Evangelina replied. "The living rarely pay attention to those they associate with death. They'll speak freely around you, show their true selves."

As they turned back toward the heart of the cemetery, a chill wind rustled through the trees, carrying whispers that seemed almost like voices. Neither Butcher nor



Evangelina mentioned it, but both felt its presence.

"The dead and the undead," Butcher remarked with grim humor. "Interesting alliance we're forming."

"Sometimes the best guardians are those who exist between worlds," Evangelina replied. "Besides, I have unfinished business in Cauldron Falls."

Together, the zombie caretaker and the ghost researcher continued their patrol of the cemetery, their unlikely partnership forming the first line of defense against threats yet to be revealed.

Beyond the cemetery gates, Cauldron Falls continued its moment of reprieve, unaware that within its cherished boundaries, darkness was already beginning to stir.

As the moon climbed higher in the night sky, casting long shadows across the graves, Butcher couldn't help but feel that the peace the town now enjoyed was merely the calm before another storm---one emerging from the heart of Cauldron Falls itself.

The End