

1

The spring storm had been brewing all day.

The atmosphere was humid and warm as the wind shook the old oaks. Towering dark clouds rolled in from the southwest as the sun descended over the horizon. Light reflected from the clouds gave everything a peach-colored glow as day turned into dusk.

Two boys on bicycles raced through the old Belhaven neighborhood under a canopy of swaying limbs. Jack and Patrick imagined they were flying into the eye of a hurricane as leaves swirled about them and lightning burned yellow in the heart of the approaching thunderhead. They could not have realized that they were about to be part of a storm far more devastating than the one above. A storm of hate, love, fear and courage was only a few blocks away and racing towards them.

“You won’t go near that house,” sneered Patrick.

“You won’t either.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve been there.”

“When?”

“My dad and I went over when the new owner moved in. The owner wasn’t there, but the guy who lives with him was there telling the movers where to put the boxes.”

“What was he like?”

“I liked him. He had a funny accent. His name was ‘Got Fried’ or something. Dad said he acted sort a funny and he wouldn’t let us in the house—too big of a mess he said.”

“The place still looks haunted,” said Jack. “You hardly ever see any lights on, and my sister said she heard weird snarls and sounds coming from there one night.”

The eleven year olds heard the first murmurings of distant thunder as they stopped their bikes across the street from the house. The ninety-year-old Victorian house was one of the biggest in the neighborhood, but after years of desertion it had fallen into disrepair. The neighbors had hoped that the new owner would fix-up the once majestic home, but he had done little in the two months since he moved in. The house was dark and looked devoid of life, as usual. It was a two-story mansion with a gabled attic on the third level. A tower stretched three stories high on the northeast corner, and an elaborate porch wrapped around the house on two sides.

“Well, Patrick, are you ready to go knock on the door?”

“I will if you will.”

They parked their bikes on the sidewalk and started to cross the street. Somehow it just didn’t seem right to park their bikes on the same side of the street as the old house. The thunderhead loomed above the roof. The cloud was suddenly lit from within by lightning and glowed bright yellow, outlining the spire and gables. The boys were still in the middle of the street when Patrick stopped.

“Jack! I saw something in the window!”

Just then there was a rush of wind and a crackling sound above as a limb snapped and crashed into the yard ahead of them.

“No way, Jack,” said Patrick as he began backtracking. “I’m not going up there, no, uh-uh.”

Jack turned to look at Patrick, then at the house, then at Patrick again.

With their nerves already on edge, both boys jumped at the sound of screeching tires! They looked down the street in time to see first one car, and then another slide around the corner half a block away and race up the street towards them.

“Run!” yelled Jack as both boys dashed back onto the sidewalk and dove into a holly bush.

They started complaining about their choice of hiding places, but in an instant their eyes were riveted across the street, their mouths agape.

The first car slid to a stop in front of the house. The driver's door opened even before the car stopped. The second car swerved to the left, jumped the curb, scraped along the left side of the first car, smacked the open door and sent it bouncing down the sidewalk.

"Wow!" said both boys under their breaths simultaneously.

As the second car stopped, it blocked the now empty space where the driver's door of the first car had been. The first driver climbed out of the passenger door. The boys could see that he was an average sized man with blond hair wet with perspiration, but what they remembered most was the look of sheer terror on his face.

A short, dark-haired man jumped out of the second car.

"That's 'Got Fried'!" exclaimed Patrick, pointing at the second driver.

People ran into their front lawns to see what was going on in their usually quiet neighborhood. Mrs. Adams left her porch and ran to the street in time to see the first driver reach into his car, grab a duffle bag and run around the front of both cars. "Got Fried" growled like a wild animal, leaped with amazing agility over the hood of his car and tackled the first man. Jack left the bush to get a closer look. Patrick remained motionless, his eyes glued on the struggle. "Got Fried" had a gun in his hand, and the men were struggling over it.

"God help me!" screamed the blond man.

Just then, in a flash of lightning, Patrick saw the gun in the blond man's hand. Two shots rang out and thunder shook the neighborhood, drowning the sound of Mrs. Adams' screams. She ran back into her house to call the police while other neighbors stood and stared in disbelief.

The blond man paused over the motionless body of "Got Fried" for a brief moment before he scooped the duffle bag off the ground and ran to the door of the house. With a swift kick the door burst open, and he disappeared into the dark foyer.

Three neighbors, Mr. Richards and the Bakers, ran to the aid of the fallen man, but they found a lifeless body.

It was a matter of minutes before Patrolman Ayers arrived. Black smoke billowed from the eaves of the old house, so Ayers promptly called the fire department. An ambulance and a second patrol car reached the scene as Patrolman Ayers knelt beside the fallen man.

"Where is the perpetrator?" Ayers asked Mr. Richards.

"He went in the house."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. He is medium height, kind of thin, blond hair. He's carrying a bag and a gun. He kicked the door open and rushed in."

"Is there anyone else in the house?"

"I think so. There have been some strange sounds coming from the house since he went in. We heard the sounds of a struggle and gunshots. There were flashing lights, and something else, something strange."

Then a sudden shriek occurred so loud and so shrill that everyone instinctively threw their hands over their ears. The sound subsided to a rumbling groan as flames broke through the roof and enveloped the tower.

Mr. Richards gasped at the sound and said, "What the..."

"It must be the house collapsing," said Ayers as he turned and began waving people away from the blazing building. "We'd better get these people back."

"That's him—That's the murderer!" shouted Becky Baker, pointing at the doorway.

Everyone saw the silhouette of a man against a background of flames, stumbling through the foyer. Ayers raced towards him and met him at the doorway. The exhausted man leaned on the patrolman as the two of them made their way off the porch and into the yard. The man was sooty and red from the heat. His shirt was torn, exposing deep scratch marks across his chest and blood dripped from his cheek. Blood was splattered on his clothes. He clutched a mallet in his right hand. His eyes were glazed with a distant look.

"Is anyone else in the house?" demanded Ayers.

The blond man turned slowly towards Ayers and said, "No, there's no one left alive."

"What do you mean?"

"I killed him."

"Who did you kill?" asked Officer Ayers knowing that this was a critical moment that might reveal the truth. The suspect was still in the emotion of the moment and had not had time to consider his legal plight, invent excuses or talk to a lawyer.

"Who did you kill?"

"The vampire!"

Ayers stared at him in stunned silence.

"It's finally over."

"No, buddy, I think this is just the beginning."

That night, Ayers' superiors determined that it would be better not to publicly mention the "vampire" statement, at least not yet.

The fire department was unable to control the flames, and the old house was utterly razed. Three skeletal remains were found in the rubble the next day.