

In the early evening, Astrid drove Jenny down a back road outside South Bend, Indiana, close to the toll road that leads to Chicago, to a hill far away from the city. This region had many hills, but this one was the highest around. Though a narrow road went up a gradual incline, Astrid parked the car in a parking lot at the foot of the hill.

“That road is good for getting up the hill fast, but this is the fun way up the hill,” she said, leading Jenny down a dirt path to the side hidden from the road. She pointed to a rope tow that went so far up the hill that they couldn’t see the other end of it. “This is to help you walk up the hill safely, though you really don’t need it: It isn’t *that* steep. Hold on tight. You have to keep up, and it’s a long drag if you slip.”

Jenny doubted the wisdom of using the rope.

Astrid held the moving rope as she walked up the hill. Jenny watched her until she disappeared from view, then stared at the rope. It was just a regular rope looped around two pulleys, not inspiring confidence. Jenny sighed and grabbed it. She shrieked as the pull knocked her off balance. *Please, God, don’t let me go bounding down the hill, over and over in a dirty, bloody mess.* She clutched the rope and righted herself as it crept up the hill to the sound of cranking gears. She stumbled sometimes, but always held on, never falling. Getting rope burn was more fun than taking the road?

Within maybe five minutes she came to a flatter area at the top of the hill, and saw the top pulley. Astrid stood next to it.

“There you are.” She grinned as if the rope tow were the easiest thing in the world.

Jenny let go of the rope and fell into the grass. Grimacing, she brushed herself off.

Astrid had no grass on her face at all.

“How did you do it so perfectly?” Jenny grumbled.

Astrid chuckled. “Practice. We like to use it a lot, though the vampires prefer to turn into bats and fly.”

That was a better idea.

Astrid turned. “The Lighthouse.” She threw her arms open wide to indicate the building in front of them. It looked like a traditional, though extra-wide, lighthouse from the outside. The wall was green, the door blue. The top light was on, not for ships but to keep planes from crashing into it. It was a lighthouse for a sea of greening hills.

Astrid pulled open the heavy door and greeted the normal-looking, hefty bouncer. Jenny stood outside, gazing at the scant view inside from the doorway. Astrid grimaced and moved behind her.

Astrid called out, “Hey, everybody, I’ve got some new blood here.” She shoved Jenny through the doorway. Jenny stumbled.

Had Astrid made her into a sacrifice for vampires?

Jenny loved the ambience of the room despite, or maybe because of, the red, hellish walls, the strange dolls and morbid mural, and smoky haze that made the room look misty like a cemetery at night. Only the setting sun lit the lounge through the windows and door. She loved the electronic and industrial music.

Jenny knew she was supposed to be careful what friends she picked, not people with black plastic skulls, black curtains and black walls in their bedrooms. But she and Astrid clicked from their first meeting, and Astrid's influence was never bad. Astrid wanted to paint her walls blue so she'd be different even from other people with skulls in their bedrooms.

The tiny room always made Jenny uneasy, what with the decor, vampire posters and a scarlet bedspread. The lavender incense and the poster of Barnabas Collins, the vampire in the 1960s soap opera *Dark Shadows*, did not bother her. Jenny wanted to borrow the Anne Rice novels. But Astrid's old Barbie doll was the most disturbing of all, hanging from the overhead fan by a sash tied around her neck, with black-dyed hair, a homemade black cape and dress, black shoes and blue-penned fangs on the edges of her smiling mouth. Whenever the fan was on, she clicked and banged around and around until Astrid could stand the sound no longer.

“All right. Which room are you in?”

“I don't know. I-got lost. That's how I found these people.”

“Got lost?” He chuckled and my face flushed. “Is there a number on the phone? I'll trace you with that.”

I gave the extension number to him. He hung up to call one of the owners, then called me back and said, “The owner says they’re okay, if you can handle them. He said they live here and love to party in that room. He kept snickering, though. I don’t know why.”

“Is it all right for me to stay here for dinner?”

“Of course. This is better than I could’ve hoped for. You’ll get totally immersed in the culture.”

Someone began playing an instrument--a man kneeling on a tabletop and playing a lute. He looked like a jester in his red hose and long, red robe with wide, green zigzags across it. He sang,

Dear princess, give me a look.

Dear princess, don’t forget me.

When you find your home,

Dragon though I am,

I shall always love thee.

I’d be immersed in something, all right.

I often gazed at Colin and longed to be alone with him again, even as the tour guide, a middle-aged woman who owned the castle with her husband, showed us fascinating sections in which we often had to carry candles.

Many of the sections and rooms were left in their drafty stone-walled

condition to keep the ambience. Some were reached by secret passageways. The dungeon, in one of the two gatehouse towers, held a torture chamber and a deep, dark oubliette. The dungeon was cold and smelled of wet stone. The guide said that dungeons were unusual in castles, so the one here was a treat for us.

A skeleton with tattered clothes lay shackled by its wrists to the wall in the oubliette. I gasped. Colin rushed to my side, took off his Inverness cape and wrapped it around me. Full of the scent of his detergent, it reminded me of his kiss and made me stumble.

He snickered. His breath tickled my ear as he said, "It's plastic. Oh, hey, old Edwin is here watching us."

I looked around. "Where?" I asked.

"I guess you can't see him, then. He's by the shackles. He sometimes comes to visit, to remember old times. Ghosts can't help that. Fortunately for him, no one who put him here actually stayed behind to haunt the place."

I shuddered.

The tour guide was telling tales of the dungeon now. One mentioned a man named Edwin, thrown into the oubliette by a bad-tempered nobleman for having sung an awful song about dragons.

I whispered to Colin, "I don't want to be here. I don't know why you told me there's a ghost here. Now I'm scared."

"Why? You've met him already. He's not a bad chap and I happen to like the dragon song. Don't you?"

I pulled the cape more tightly around my shoulders.

Every Sunday after that, he chatted with her before the morning and evening services. The chats were always short, and he did most of the talking.

One chat went like this:

“Such a cold evening, isn’t it, my dear?”

“Yes, Mr. Jarkin.” She widened her eyes at him, willing him to understand: *Don’t be so familiar. Last-name basis, because I’m not your dear!*

“I hope the sermon will be as good as last week’s. Wasn’t that an excellent survey of the darkness of the soul?”

“I barely remember it.”

Jarkin raised his eyebrows. “Perhaps it is your youth. I found it insightful, especially after some of my experiences.”

Rather than glancing at him as usual, Becky stared at him. What experiences?

“I hope it will prevent members of the congregation from dabbling in the occult.” He rambled on in vivid detail about demon possessions, haunted houses and occult practices—his favorite subjects. Though Becky pulled her coat closer around her shoulders, she felt even colder.

He ended with, “All these things prove that if we dabble in the occult, we invite demons to torment us.”

I don’t recall dabbling in the occult, yet I have a demon tormenting me. Can’t you

tell how much you terrify me?

“Oh, the service is about to begin. Farewell, my dear.”

She'd lost all that time when she just wanted to read *Anne of Green Gables*.

He kissed her hand. He always did when he left her. Her perverse heart liked that part—maybe because he was leaving.

That night she lay awake for hours, her heart pounding. Through her mind raced images of ghosts ripping flesh, demons laughing, and restless corpses lying beneath the Amityville House. She fought but could not forget them. She huddled under the covers, shaking, though her own house was not haunted. She dreamed of ghosts in her church or high school—not of the power of God against evil, which Jarkin wanted to impress on her.

Fortunately, she could sleep late: She no longer had to go to school and did not have a job. Her parents did not want her to waste time with college or a career, since she would one day marry and become a housewife.

As her mother always said, “No woman should let her career overshadow her husband's; the husband's job is to provide for and lead the home, and the wife's job is to care for the home and family. This is God's plan.”

After Jarkin returned, she went to the front door and got the mail. She opened a letter.

The sun shone through the door's window, full and warm. Birds chirped

outside. The trees were full of buds and new leaves. The grass had turned bright green. The scent of flowers wafted into the room.

Becky gasped as if someone choked her.

“Good heavens, Rebecca, what’s the matter?” Jarkin grabbed the letter. It read:

Dear “Reverend” Jarkin, I am a witch. I do not want to be burned or pressed or hung or any other nasty thing you might think of. Where did you get your information about witches—a Chick Tract? Your words are doing harm, and they will come back to you threefold. You’ll find out how, when you least expect it. I’m not a Wiccan, so I do whatever I like. Your eyes deserve to be gouged out for looking at people with hate, your tongue deserves to be cut out for what it says, and your penis deserves to be chopped off so you can’t breed. Sincerely, A Friend.

Jarkin’s eyes blazed. “This is why witches should be rooted out from the land.”

Becky sobbed. “What is this? Why do they say these things about you?” She could not accept that Jarkin was a villain.

“Because they refuse to see the Truth. They are evil. Witches were once burned for good reason. These witches refuse to listen to my words and turn away from Satan.”

She could no longer deny what she heard. “How can they, when you mean one thing but say another? How can anyone understand that you mean conversion?”

He gaped. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you see? No one understands you. Your sermons are all about witches these days, about how they once were burned. You told me you just want to convert them, not burn them. But how can I believe you when you look at the burning of the past as if you wish it were still done?”

“And we should burn them.” He shook the letter. His voice rose. “This letter is proof! Don’t you remember what I told you, that they used to taunt me? They tried to put hexes on me. They told me I’d go to Hell if I touched their bookbags. They cornered me on the way home from school and beat me. My sister can tell you what they did to me and even to her. She showed me the Scriptures, that witches are to be burned.” His screams sounded like Hitler. “They are evil, every last one of them. Your friend Sasha has probably drunk the blood of a baby while calling on Satan! God speaks to me in visions and dreams; he tells me that my words, though they reach a small audience now, will soon spark a revolution in this country. We will retake this nation for Christ—but only by burning out the evil.”

“Sasha’s not evil!” Becky backed away from him. “You lied to me! You lied to me! They send you these death threats because they see clearly what you’re saying. I didn’t want to see it, but I see it now.”

He grabbed her arm. “Don’t speak to me that way. I’m your—Wait, what is that?” He goggled at her neck.

“What is what?” She knew what he meant.

He ran his fingers over her neck. “This: two marks. They’re not deep, but they look like—a fang bite? How can this be? What bit you that bites like that?”

What—good heavens, it couldn't be!"

He strode to the podium dressed as you might expect for a speaker on vampirism. Despite his pasty complexion, fangs, and pointy ears and eyebrows, few of the male students looked half so tasty. Tall, probably five to ten years older than the average senior guy, and manly in his Dracula suit and cape, he pranced back and forth across the red-lit, smoky stage. His voice boomed with defense of the vampire. Of course it was an act, a creative way to intrigue college students with the history of vampire folklore. I huddled into my jacket with a sudden chill.

"I'm sure many of you have heard the tales of sterile and even sexless vampires, particularly through such writers as Anne Rice," he said once. "But in some cultures, I am said to produce half-human, half-vampire children called dhampirs. And how many of you know that the Count on *Sesame Street* is based on actual legends? Yes, in some cultures, I am said to be obsessed with counting. How do you keep a vampire busy all night? You spread seeds on the ground around his grave!"

Such a sexy man! Megan, Shelly and I nearly swooned. We were sitting right in the front row, too, so we got a good look at him. Several times he held my eyes with his: black, shiny, transfixing. Once, he winked. I nearly fainted. My friends saw and gasped. They teased me about it later, but I didn't care.

“Now for the second part of the initiation,” Vincent said. “You two must go alone into the secret passages and find your way back.”

“Don’t worry,” Scott whispered to Jenny. “I have great navigational sense.”

“We’ll blindfold you and put you in a spot in the middle of the passages.”

Jenny’s stomach fell over in shock. Even Scott gasped. To her surprise, both Astrid and Peter smiled at her as if nothing were wrong. Elinor and Beth whispered to each other and giggled as if they were in the lounge. Peter winked at her. Her eyebrows flew up and she felt warm; the thrill of his wink mixed with dismay that he had no problem with this part of the initiation.

Once deposited in a small, black, musty room in the bowels of the Lighthouse, with only a flashlight to light the way, Scott and Jenny looked at each other in horror.

“Some friends, huh? Didn’t even warn us about this,” Scott said.

“Maybe they weren’t supposed to.” Jenny could think nothing bad of her friends, especially Astrid, without feeling disloyal.

“I don’t know Clive well enough to expect anything other than hazing from him.” He shined the flashlight around the room. Jenny cringed at the spiders.

“I’ll have to take a shower as soon as we get back,” she said in a whimper.

“We can think about that later. For now, let’s just get back. There’s a tunnel.”

They stepped through low, concrete tunnels and wood-paneled rooms, down ramps and down steps, Jenny often tripping over her feet. At last, Scott stopped and Jenny ran into him. Scott cried out.

“Sorry,” Jenny said.

“That’s all right,” Scott said. “I did stop suddenly.” He shined the light around the room. “Three ways out. What do you make of it?”

“I have no clue. It all looks the same to me.”

“This reminds me of the new Nine Inch Nails CD: We’ve been heading in a downward spiral. I think we’re going toward the basement. I also think we’re between the outer walls and the living areas. I don’t want to end up in that basement.”

A distant wail took away Jenny’s voice before she could reply. Her knees buckled. Scott caught her.

“Careful, Jenny.” Scott stroked her cheek when she was upright again. “Remember what Peter said: It’s probably just wind in the caverns.”

“Are you sure?” Jenny’s voice croaked. “They say there’s real ghosts in this place.”

“Yes, I know, but we can’t think about that right now or we won’t get anywhere.”

“Can’t you use jinn powers or something to find the way?”

“There’s only so much I can do. It’s not like I’m a full-blooded genie.” He inspected the three tunnels out of the room. “No help here. Just choose one, I guess.”

It was cold enough to see your breath. You could smell the chill. While blindfolded, I got separated from the group and lost. I think that was the point. When it got too quiet, a silence that filled my ears, I slipped off the blindfold to see what was going on. Of course I got scared all alone in a dark cemetery, thinking every stone shining white in the moonlight was a ghost or skeleton. I prayed with every breath. I wandered around. A foot-not mine-stepped in dead leaves. I stopped. Voices came near. At first I thought it was the frat. But wait-that was Candida's voice!

"No!" she cried. "I won't."

"You will," a young guy said, gently as if speaking to an ignorant child. "I brought you here for a reason, so you will carry out my wishes."

Was the guy one of the actives? Did he want her to help them play a prank on me? If I found out what it was without them knowing, I could screw up their plans and have the last laugh. Then I could smack him for annoying Candida. I sneaked toward the voices until I saw Candida lit by a moonbeam. I hid behind an angel monument and watched. The man was in shadow. Candida's straight, white-blonde hair hung free down to her butt. She wore a white dress with just one frill or two; I think it was her nightgown. It flowed to her feet and an open, thin gray robe covered it. She had to be freezing, yet she didn't even shiver. Only black satin slippers covered her feet. The scent of her favorite honeysuckle perfume drifted to me. It made me weak; I wanted to wrap her in my jacket and

hold her to me.

The man moved into the moonlight with her. He looked like an upperclassman. He was tall, pale and skinny, his nose long and thin, his eyes gray (as I discovered later), his mouth hard and cold. Black hair flowed to his waist, not straggly but trimmed neatly. Under an old-fashioned, black cloak he wore a dark blue, silk poet shirt, a closed, black vest and dark blue pants. He was Candida's ideal.

He massaged her neck. She recoiled and threw up her hands. He grabbed her hands with one swift move. He put his mouth on her neck as if to kiss it. A few moments later, he moved his head. Two small, dark dots appeared on Candida's neck. Two skinny lines flowed from the dots.

"Yes, I will do as you say," she said. Her voice sounded distant.

Randall met me at the door that evening with a smile, a vigorous (though chilly) handshake and a boisterous,

"Hello, hello, friend Josh! Welcome to our mini-mansion. Do you want a drink?"

"Do you have Mountain Dew?" I asked.

"Yes, we do. Candida says she can't survive without it or chocolate. I understand her addiction, since I have my own." He grinned with his eyebrows drawn together.

An image flashed through my mind of Randall pouring blood from a vial—or maybe from his own veins—into a can of pop. “Could I—have that in a glass—a clear glass, please?”

Randall frowned for a moment in confusion, but then he said, “All right, whatever you wish.”

“I’ll get it for you,” Candida said. She bounded off down the hallway to the kitchen. At least she was still bouncy and vibrant, which I had always loved about her.

Randall offered me the loveseat. He sat in a wicker chair adjacent to it. I hoped he didn’t notice as I swept my gaze over the seat before sitting down. Nope, no blood or—um—emissions from him and Candida—um—christening the house’s furniture. Another image flashed through my mind: Candida naked in his arms. I got a wincing headache.

“So—um—who are you?” I asked.

“Mr. Candida, Randall Ankh.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Ankh? The Egyptian symbol for life?”

“Yes. Unusual name, isn’t it? My parents changed their last name to it. They held great stock in symbolism and loved to study ancient Egypt. This idol of Set came from them.”

He put his hand on a small stone statue of a two-legged, muscular being with a dog-like face, long ears and a loincloth. Candida allowing an idol in her house was odd enough, but wasn’t Set supposed to be evil, killing his own brother Osiris?

Candida bounced back into the room with a tall glass of Mountain Dew, nearly splashing it on me as she handed it to me.

“And what is your last name?” Randall asked.

I flinched. I meant my question to be more probing, a way to get him to confess, “Yes, I am a vampire, and my last name is ironic considering the death and destruction I bring.” But he turned it right around on me before it had a chance to work. Not that I knew how it could work, anyway.

“Hilfe. It’s German for ‘help.’ You know, in case you hear anybody say, ‘Hilf mir,’ that’s what they mean: ‘Help me.’”

He did not seem to notice my subtle barb. “Any friend of Candida’s is a friend of mine, and she tells me you’re one of her best. I had to let you into our house because she would not stop talking about you. Perhaps I should be jealous.” His eye flashed red, then went back to steel gray. “When you get a treasure like Candida, you don’t want to let her go.”

Didn’t I know it.

I scratched my eyebrow, probably a nervous tic. I found Randall more disconcerting the more amiable he seemed.

“Oh, you haven’t even touched your drink,” Candida chirped from beside the wicker chair.

The doorbell rang. I jumped. Some of my drink splashed. Candida called out “hello” when Randall trotted to the door and opened it. A few “heys” showed it was an old friend of Randall’s. This friend walked in, another pale-faced young guy, though black. His clothes were dark blue, well-cut and expensive. I’m not

much of a judge of male looks, but he seemed to be in the same category as Denzel Washington or Billy Dee Williams. That meant he caused lust in any woman. That meant I was the ugly one in this house.

“Josh, Candida, this is Vincent,” Randall said. “Shall I get you a drink?” he asked Vincent.

“Oh, yes, the usual,” Vincent said. “I’ve had nothing to drink all evening.”

Randall trotted off.

“Are you a friend of Randall’s?” Vincent asked.

“No, Candida’s,” I said.

“How long have you known her?”

“Since spring.”

“I’ve only just met her, myself. So this is she, the beautiful Candida.” He nodded at her in a way so smooth and chivalric it made me jealous.

Candida flushed and grinned back at him boldly. My likelihood of catching her eye was getting worse all the time.

Randall returned with a wineglass full of a sanguine liquid. Wine, yes, it must be red wine. Yet when Vincent drank it, it made bloody stains on the side of the glass. No, no, it’s wine, it’s got to be wine. My head felt light. I turned my gaze to the Mountain Dew, hoping to get the image out of my head. I had to get the phantom, iron taste of blood out of my mouth. I took a sip. I couldn’t stop myself; I imagined the liquid going down my throat was not Dew, but blood. I gagged. My head spun. Candida leaped to my side.

“Are you okay?” she cried.

I gazed at her without speaking. Through fuzzy vision I turned to Vincent and then Randall, who sat there with his eyebrows drawn together in what looked like concern. He was so pale, so—

I had to get out of there. “I’m sorry, Candida; I’m not feeling well. I have to go home.”

“Don’t be silly. We can take care of you here.” She stroked my hair. All my nerve endings begged me to stay and let her keep doing that, but I could not do it.

“No, really, I’d much rather be in my own room.”

I jumped up, grabbed my coat and ran out of the house, never minding how dizzy I was. Candida soon ran after me, throwing on her coat and carrying my glass of pop.

“You forgot this,” she said. “I’ll walk you back to campus and make sure you get to your room all right.”

I hugged her. How I wanted to stay nestled in her softness. “It’s sweet of you, but I can’t let you walk back by yourself in the dark. This is the city, after all.”

She smiled, kissed my cheek, handed me the glass and turned back.

As I walked, I drew in deep breaths of the chill air, blowing them out and watching the vapor. Back in my room, the glass sat untouched on top of the little box of a refrigerator in my room. My roommate was all too happy to take it off my hands, and I was all too happy to let him. I cleaned and returned the glass in the morning.

Though I loved Dew, it was many months before I could drink it again,

especially from a glass.

Scott didn't show up at the next Lighthouse meeting. However, Jenny found a letter in her campus mailbox on Monday after school started again. It was signed "Babette," and from the lack of a return address or anything but Jenny's name and box number, Babette had obviously come on campus to mail it. It read,

What you've done is atrocious. I'm sick of seeing you online. Scott is sick of the sight of you both online and off. He wants nothing to do with you. You should never have done these things. Leave him alone and stop harassing him and sending him e-mails and coming in the chat room with us and sending him letters and posting idiotic messages to him in the forums. If you don't, I'll come out there to the school and find you (and you don't want that). I see you doing everything he says you're doing, and I don't want to be associated with people who do things like that, especially when they're hurting someone I care about. Take this letter to heart and LEAVE SCOTT ALONE.

Jenny read this letter as she sat at her desk before class. Her throat ached and she trembled, forced to control herself. She stayed out of class discussion as much as possible. But as soon as she got back to her room, she screamed in frustration. She balled up the letter and threw it against the wall, but the impact was too soft to make her feel better. Instead, she found her rubber ball

and threw it against the outside wall again and again.

When she'd calmed down a bit, she called Astrid and read the letter to her.

Astrid said, "That letter is a joke! She sounds really bossy, like she wants to control Scott. Isn't it illegal to threaten someone through the mail, some sort of anti-stalking law?"

"It might be. I don't know. It should be." If Jenny were in a better mood, she would have laughed: Babette, in threatening a supposed stalker, became a stalker herself!

"If I were you, I wouldn't go anywhere at night without an escort. She might really be stalking you, just waiting for a chance to beat you up or worse. She's very unstable, and even logging onto that dang BBS might be enough to get her to think it's time to 'find you.' Take the letter to the dean of students. One glance at it and he'll take action so fast she won't know what hit her. I wouldn't be surprised if the police were called in to help. If the dean told me to do something, I'd do it so I wouldn't get in trouble. That's like your boss telling you to shape up or you'll get fired."

Jenny also called Elinor and Peter, who had little time to talk but did sympathize, and then she told her roommate about the letter as soon as she came back. They all agreed with Astrid.

Her roommate said, "This new girlfriend is probably just some ho and won't last long. She's probably the exact opposite of you, and Scott probably keeps calling her by your name. That'll get on her nerves."

It was still only mid-afternoon, so Jenny went to the dean of students,

Harrison Brown.

She fought to keep her voice firm, confident and level. “Someone has threatened me through the mail with violence, which I believe is called stalking.” The poetic justice gave her a delightful chill. She handed the smoothed-out letter to Mr. Brown, a tall, muscular man in his forties with dark hair, a beard and glasses.

He read it and said, “Jenny, Scott has already told me about the whole situation between you two. He’s worried about what you might do. I have to be frank with you. You’re on shaky ground here, and he is ready to get a restraining order against you if this keeps up. He came to me so I could warn you first. He said you’ve been spreading rumors about him, saying that you’re getting back together. He didn’t say anything about this letter, and it’s possible he doesn’t even know about it yet. You’ve got to leave him alone and accept that he’s moved on. Just stop doing the things this Babette says here, and there shouldn’t be any trouble.”

During this speech, the blood left Jenny’s head, and now came back and burned her face. This was too much! All the frustration of the past few weeks now boiled inside her. She banged her open palm on the desk, disregarding the pain. She jumped up and cried,

“I don’t believe this! You haven’t even heard my side of it, and here you are ready to call me a stalker along with everyone else. I’m not. I’m not! He’s lying to you!”

Mr. Brown’s hand moved to the telephone on his desk. “You must calm

down. You may be in denial about your actions, but you have to face the truth. And if you get violent with me, I'll call campus security!"

"Violent? What kind of monster do you think I am? I'm not a stalker and I'm not going to get violent! I'm not stalking, I'm not harassing anyone, and what he's telling you is all one-sided."

"He showed me all your letters and e-mails and his responses to you. They seem to be adequate proof of his statements."

"But his responses to me are obviously meant to play with my mind and manipulate me. And the letters and e-mails hardly tell the whole story. He lies even in what he says to *me*. He's spreading rumors about *me*. If he believes them, he's clearly delusional, because the things he says to me and others aren't what happened at all. So now somebody threatens me and I'm supposed to do nothing?"

"Are you sure she meant it as a threat of bodily harm? I'm not so sure."

"Well, I am. My friends know the real me and what really happened, and they can all see this girl is crazy and dangerous. Why can't you see what's obvious? Do something about her!"

His voice stayed infuriatingly calm and level. "Did your friends actually see everything that happened, or is it your word against his? Young lady, I will not have you yelling at me in my own office. If you don't leave now, I'm calling security."

Jenny huffed. She wanted to say something in her own defense, or give some biting criticism of his handling of the situation, but could think of nothing. She

snatched up the letter, which would be good evidence. She turned and strode out of the office. She slammed the door behind her. Bystanders stared at her audacity.

A flash of light caught her eye. She turned to look. Why was a six-foot-tall lemming standing in a corner of the lounge? She stopped and blinked. It disappeared. She shook her head. Great, now she was seeing things.

It moved. The tentacles waved. Jenny stopped breathing. The shadow turned and began to creep down the wall. The movements, the number of tentacles, the fangs—it was a spider!

Many small, grubby hands grabbed and clutched at Jenny's body. She turned her head, but couldn't see who they belonged to. The owners cackled. They smelled as if they'd never bathed. They lifted her up and carried her high. They lowered her at the edge of a small pit.

“Wait—What are you doing?” Jenny cried.

The hands dropped her into the pit. She screamed. At least the fall was short, broken by a twig-strewn floor. She stood. The walls were too far above her head for her to pull herself out. She caught a glimpse of small, men-like creatures with huge noses, hairy bodies and long arms. They reminded her of pictures of goblins in books by Brian Froud. These goblins hooted and scurried away.

“Let me out!” Jenny reached up her hands, feeling for handholds and

footholds, but found only smooth, slimy wall and stickiness. Her hands and feet got stuck in something webby. “Oh, no. Why did you put me in here? Who are you? What did I ever do to you?”

Didn't she once see this on a children's program when she was little? Some poor little girl was thrown into a spider's lair by a vampire. At least, that's how she remembered it. Maybe it was on a show by Sid and Marty Krofft? It scared her so much that her parents forbade her to watch it again.

A clicking noise alerted her to look above the other side of the pit. A huge head, much like the formation she'd seen, loomed at the edge of the pit. The spider crept ever closer. It dipped. It crawled down the side of the pit, opposite her. Her mouth opened and her larynx moved, but no sound came out.

The floor gave out beneath her feet. She dropped into another pit, but didn't touch bottom. She looked down, but the light shone into blackness.

“What is this, the rabbit hole in *Alice In Wonderland*?” she cried.

At least the spider wasn't there. She still fell. Was this a bottomless pit? Oh, no! The light still shone into blackness. Where was the end?

“God, help me, please!”