

1

THE VAMPIRE IN ROOM 204

Vampires are not the nicest people. Maybe that happens when you live forever and don't get enough sun. So when I pass Mr. Davenport's bedroom door, I tiptoe, making my bare feet quiet as cotton balls tossed on the floor. Vampires can hear your thoughts and dreams, don't you know. So I'm not surprised when Mr. Davenport comes out wanting to kill me. I was dead once myself. I shouldn't let him scare me. But right now, I could wet my britches.

Green veins sit on top of his feet. His toes twist and curl, and his yellow toenails need tending; that's what I notice. Then I see them. Fangs. Long as the hound's

teeth that bit my uncle's two middle fingers off. "If you come in my room again I'll —" He's running up the hall, stepping in the spot I made yesterday when I tried to wash my cat, Juppie, with Lucky Tiger hair tonic for men. It makes her fur shine.

Mr. Davenport steps on the back of my heel and I trip. Fingers that feel like crab claws dig into my arm, pinching, pulling me so close I can smell his sour breath burning my eyelashes off, practically. I try to scream. But the words get stuck in my throat. His fangs get closer and closer to my neck, tasting my blood, I bet, before they even break the skin.

"Don't make me come up there, girl!" Aunt Shuma is standing at the bottom of the steps.

He stops. His bloodshot eyes staring into mine. When he whispers, his voice is softer than a spider walking across a feather. "I could kill you . . . if I wanted." His hands hold on to my throat, squeezing.

"Mr. Davenport. You okay?" Aunt Shuma's not worried about me. Just him, the boarder who pays the most rent of anyone living here — fifteen dollars a week. "I try to keep her away but she wants to be a writer, too, like you. And solve mysteries like that Nancy Drew. Terrible imagination she got. Girl — come!"

As quick as a blink, he is at the other end of the hall, by his door, wiping his fingers on his flannel pants like he was touching something dirty when he had his hands

on me. “I want it back.” His words are in my head, not in the air for my ears to hear. His fangs disappear. And he turns me loose. “It belongs to me. And I’ll get it back from you. One way or another.”

Holding my neck, I warn him like he’s warning me. “Everybody will know about you, even President Eisenhower. Negroes helped elect him, you know. So I wrote to him about you.” Right then I wonder why my garlic did not protect me. Out the corner of my eyes, I see the sun coming up. Daylight ought to kill him, or at least send him running. “What kind of vampire are you?”

He smiles. “I write books. Don’t you know?” Then he disappears.

Running upstairs. Jumping into the bed. And crossing myself. I reach under my pillow to grab the jar of cut-up garlic I keep in my room because my aunt says if I keep eating the big, whole cloves, she will put me out like she did the rabbits I snuck in once.

Eating a few pieces, I hop out of bed and pull a chair across the room to stand on. As careful as a mother bird carrying her young, I pick up Mr. Davenport’s ring. When I took it from his room, I hid it on the top shelf of my closet in the box that holds Auntie’s blue satin pillbox hat. I knew he would never look for it there.

Sometimes after everyone goes to sleep, I sit outside Mr. Davenport’s room waiting for him to come home from doing his vampire work. I always fall asleep, so of

course Auntie must carry me to bed. Last night was different. A girl crying inside his room woke me before Auntie did. I had a pointy stick when I went inside his room. Checking underneath his bed and behind the curtains, I tried my best to find her. Just before I left I heard her say, “Octobia May.” She even knew my last name. “Help me.”

“Where are you?” I said, stepping into the big cedar closet. Standing face-to-face with his army uniform, I saluted sadly. Mr. Davenport fought in World War II a few years ago. Before Dracula and his friends got to him and turned him evil.

I tried my best to rescue her, but I couldn’t find her anywhere. I did find a dollar. Plus two twenty-dollar bills balled up in a corner. I only went into his jacket pockets to see how rich he was. That’s when I found the ring.

I saw my first ever vampire movie in October — one of the months I’m named after. I turned ten and finally Auntie said I was old enough to go to the drive-in movies on monster night. We saw *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* and *House of Dracula*. The next evening — he moved in.

It took me a long time to recognize him for what he is. I think that’s because Mr. Davenport is colored like me. In comic books and movies, the vampires are all white. Now I know the truth — vampires do not discriminate. Any race is welcome to join their club.