

THE Z-TECH CHRONICLES

# ONCE UPON A NIGHTWALKER

« A NOVELETTE »



RYAN SOUTHWICK



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# ONCE UPON A NIGHTWALKER

THEY WONDERED IF ELLEN WAS GOING TO EAT THEM. Favian, especially, tugged his necktie every time he noticed Ellen's unnaturally large, black eyes on him, as if the office were an oven and he the holiday turkey. Rosetta stood next to him, whispering in tones they mistakenly thought Ellen couldn't hear.

The last hour of daylight bathed them in soft orange hues. It cut across the floor, separating them from Ellen's shaded desk on the near side of the spacious open office. For now, they were warm. For now, they were safe. For the next hour, they knew Ellen wouldn't risk burning herself to approach.

For the next hour — the beginning of her business day, and the end of theirs — Ellen would be isolated from her coworkers. Again.

She sighed. Just once, it would have been nice to be greeted as a peer, briefed on the day's activities, included in the strategy sessions, but the ritual of exclusion had repeated every evening since her return to Brenton Marketing two weeks ago. Ellen would be a fool to think tonight would be any different. Even so, she couldn't help looking their direction, wishing it would be so.

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She found Rosetta smiling at her.

Ellen glanced over her shoulder to make sure it wasn't for someone else. The office behind her was empty. The smile was for Ellen.

Her heart had stopped beating six years ago during The Change, but if it had still worked, it would have been leaping. No one had smiled at Ellen with anything but pity — including her husband — since her return to America four weeks ago, when she'd left her Nightwalker brothers and sisters in Dubai, and returned to Boston to scrape her life off the road from where The Change had run it over. Rosetta's smile was full of warmth, welcoming, and camaraderie, just as when they'd worked together before Ellen lost her pulse. She was happy for that glimpse of her old life. Her return smile said as much.

Too late, Ellen realized her mistake. She closed her lips, hiding her long, sharp canines, but Rosetta's warm smile had already disappeared, replaced with the wide-eyed shock Ellen had come to expect at the sight of her fangs.

A sigh came from the couch area. A frizzy redhead had been sitting there since Ellen arrived over an hour ago, her green eyes frequenting Ellen's direction. Whether she was someone's relative or a client, Ellen couldn't say, so she'd ignored the redhead's stares.

Ellen reluctantly turned back to her computer and resumed sifting through messages. Sleep held her hostage for the bulk of the daylight hours. Since few were brave enough to talk to her, Ellen's only means of catching up on the day's business activities was reconstructing them from fragments of electronic communications. The process was like assembling a puzzle with missing pieces and no picture to guide her. It was slow, tedious work that sometimes required a notepad to map out.

She rubbed her eyes. Following the message threads would be easier an hour from now, when the sun finally set, and the sleepiness of day left her. "Day-brain," Nightwalkers called it. But that would also mean an hour of productivity lost — an hour she wouldn't be doing the job Brenton Marketing had graciously rehired her for, so Ellen tried to focus on the screen.

Brenton was pitching a potential client tomorrow. A big one. The original meeting had been moved up, so everyone was

scrambling to assemble a presentation with enough meat to make the client bite. Rosetta, it seemed, was the lucky person doing the pitch. Success would mean a big boost in her career.

Ellen's groggy day-brain was still slogging through messages when she heard footsteps. The scent of Rosetta's orange-and-vanilla perfume grew stronger.

"Hi, Ellen." Rosetta sat on the corner of Ellen's desk and straightened her knee-length skirt, one shapely leg crossed over the other. Her friendly smile was back.

"Evening." Ellen didn't make the mistake of showing her fangs this time and kept her smile tight. She smoothed her skirt and crossed her own legs. Next to Rosetta's healthy tan, Ellen's ashen skin, webbed with faint blue veins like the rest of her body, was even more striking, more alien. She wished she'd worn stockings. "Seems like it was a busy day. Sorry I missed it."

"You didn't miss as much as you think. Favian and I are pulling an all-nighter to get ready for tomorrow."

"An all-nighter? In the office?"

*With me?*

Ellen kept that last, joyful thought to herself.

"Yep." Rosetta leaned forward and tossed her long black hair over her shoulder. "And we'll definitely need your help."

"Need ... me." Ellen had been waiting to hear those words since the day of her Liberation. "Absolutely. I mean, yes! Just tell me how I can ..."

Beneath the perfume, Rosetta's human scent teased her nostrils.

Ellen's breath caught. The familiar sensation of her gums pushing her fangs down, elongating them in anticipation of a meal, made her shudder. If she smiled now, Rosetta would run in terror, so she kept her lips tight.

"How can I help?" Ellen said.

"Glad you asked."

Rosetta leaned closer and reached for the keyboard. Her smell was intoxicating. Ellen wasn't even hungry, but it was all she could do to resist snatching her and sinking her teeth into her neck.

But resist she did. Biting Rosetta against her will wasn't just illegal, it would go against the All Mother's mandate of peaceful coexistence — and, if nothing else, it would surely get Ellen fired.

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It was a torture every Nightwalker who wished to be among the warm-blooded had to endure. Ellen reminded herself Rosetta was a coworker, not food, and focused on the topic at hand. Her stomach still rumbled.

Rosetta opened a message from Favian further down Ellen's list. "The attached files have market data crucial to tomorrow's pitch."

"Oh."

There were over a dozen files. Ellen opened the first. It was huge and messy. She opened the next and the next. Each was as large as the first, but from different sources and in different data formats. "This is raw data. It hasn't even been collated yet."

"Exactly. To make our pitch convincing, we need to turn this data into something presentable. We need to prove how Brenton Marketing can fill their needs — and you're our pinch hitter."

"But I ... well, I'm flattered you asked, but I'm not a data analyst."

"You used to be, though, right?"

"When I started out in marketing twelve years ago, sure, but my scripts are long gone. Even if I had them, they'd be useless because the formats have changed. What about Ken? Does he still work here?"

"We can't use Ken."

"Why?"

"Ken is ... leaving. He hasn't announced it yet, but his departure isn't on the best of terms, so he's keeping it on the QT."

"So?"

"So I don't trust such a crucial task to someone who's disgruntled and on his way out! He might sabotage the results out of spite." Rosetta slid from the desk and crouched so they were at eye level. "Ellen, I need someone I can trust to do the analysis from start to finish. I need you."

"I ... s-sure. Of course I'll do it."

"I knew I could count on you, which is exactly what I told Mr. Hargreaves."

Rosetta touched her knee, then jerked her hand away. Ellen knew her cold flesh was unsettling to the warm-blooded, but the stark reminder still stung. Rosetta stood and smoothed her skirt.

"Thank you, Ellen. Favian and I will continue working on the presentation deck. Send your analysis over as soon as you can."

"I won't let you down."



Rosetta nodded, then returned to Favian across the sunlight barrier.

Ellen hunched over the keyboard with her head in her hands.

Hargreaves was involved. Worse, he was expecting Ellen to do the near-impossible task of processing the data in just a few hours. Pleasing the Vice President of Public Relations was difficult at the best of times, which certainly wasn't now. This was an important client. Anything less than perfection would be met with extreme scrutiny — that is, yelling, which was the last thing Ellen's fragile ego needed.

But lamenting her situation wouldn't help anyone. Ellen had finally been given a chance to contribute — to earn back some of the respect The Change had cost her — and she was determined to see it through. She rubbed her eyes and opened the first data file.

Thirty minutes later, Ellen was ready to throw her computer through the window. Sunset was still twenty minutes away, and while Ellen's day-brain fog was beginning to lift, it wasn't fast enough. The data was a jumble to her groggy mind. Every attempt to collate the files into a common format had only made it worse. She closed them with a disgusted tap of a key.

Something within the keyboard snapped. When Ellen tried the key again, it wouldn't work.

She curled her fingers, clenching her jaw so she wouldn't scream. Ellen would happily throw money at any company willing to make a keyboard sturdy enough to withstand a Nightwalker's strength. She opened the file cabinet next to her desk and put the broken thing on top of the others, pulled a fresh one from her reserves in the drawer above, and plugged it in.

But replacing the keyboard didn't fix her real problem. Day-brain or not, collating the data would take more time than she had. Ellen needed help.

She walked up to the sunlight barrier, whose orange hue was deepening with night's approach. Indirect rays prickled her skin like a thousand tiny flames. She squinted against the stabbing pain in her eyes and tried to ignore the discomfort.

"Favian! Can we talk for a minute, please?"

Favian reclined in his chair, basking in the last light of day. Dark curls fell across his brow. Younger than Ellen — in his late

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twenties, at most — he was trim and athletic, though hard lines and wary eyes added years to his face.

“What is it? I have work to do.”

“I ... I need your help with something.”

“Like I said, I’m busy.” He turned back to his desk.

“Favian, please! Could you come over? Just for a second?”

Favian typed a few more words, then sighed. He walked closer, but stopped at a desk a dozen feet away from the sun barrier, and crossed his arms.

“Thank you!” It wasn’t ideal, but it was as close as he was likely to come. Ellen lowered her voice. “Look, data analysis is on me. I know that, but there’s a lot of data here, and without help, it may not be ready as soon as you need it.”

“Sounds like a problem.” His eyes were hard.

“It could be,” Ellen said carefully, “but if I had just one other person to help me collate the data, especially while the sun is still up and my mind is ... well, mush, I’m sure I —”

“The Ellen I knew could work night and day when a project demanded.”

“I am the Ellen you knew! I’m just —”

“What? Corpse-cold? Bloodthirsty? Severely allergic to sunlight?”

“You know I am,” Ellen said softly.

Although the conversation wasn’t going the way she expected, it was the first time Favian had openly confronted her about being a Nightwalker, which was progress. She pulled a chair right to the sun line and sat.

“Is there something specific you’d like to ask?”

“Yeah. Why are you asking me — your food — for help? Aren’t you mentally connected to twenty million other vamps around the world?”

“Not anymore.” Ellen ignored the food jibe and kept her voice calm. “Two months ago, I underwent Liberation treatment, which means not only do I care about other people again — like you and my family — but I’m also cut off from the hierarchy. At least, until I settle in with humanity again.”

“Cut off? Why?”

“Nightwalkers who retained a mental bond with their sire had a harder time reintegrating with society, so the All Mother made it

part of the process to remove dependence on the hierarchy as soon as possible. My sire severed our bond the day after I received my injection."

Favian pulled a chair over and sat, but maintained his distance. "What was it like?"

"Which part? The having or the severing?"

"Both."

"Oh. Well, being part of the hierarchy was ... frankly, it was wonderful."

"I'd hardly call being a slave to your sire 'wonderful'."

"It didn't feel like slavery at the time. A Nightwalker's sire is their best friend — the person they want to please more than anyone in the world. Doing so gives a euphoric satisfaction. But, looking back, that wasn't the wonderful part." Ellen edged forward until she was almost touching the sunlight. "The wonderful part was never being alone. No matter where I went, my brothers and sis— ... er, those close to me in the hierarchy — were always right here." Ellen tapped her head. "I always knew where they were, what they were thinking, how they felt ... Misunderstandings were unheard of because each of us had a direct line into the others' minds."

Favian inched away. "I ... I can't imagine."

"I couldn't have either before I'd experienced it."

"It sounds like ... like you're recruiting!" His face twisted in disgust. Fear-smell rolled from him in waves.

"No! Favian, that's not what I —"

"Get away from me! I don't care how you crunch the data, just do it on that side of the office!"

Then Ellen was alone. Despair dragged her head down. Searing pain lanced her forehead, followed by the smell of burning flesh. Ellen darted back into the safety of the shadows and rubbed where the sunlight had charred her skin, but for the deeper ache of being despised by someone she'd once considered a friend, there was no comfort.

She should have returned to her desk, but until the sun set and her brain started working again, attempting to collate the data would only frustrate her more, so Ellen went to the kitchenette and fetched a bottle of hemofruit juice from the refrigerator. One

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whiff of the blood-like liquid sent a shiver of anticipation through her. Hemofruit juice wasn't blood, there was no mistaking.

No, it was better. One sip dazzled her tongue, sent her mind to that heavenly place all vampires go when feeding. Too soon, the bottle was empty. Ellen rode the high all the way to the couch area, where she plopped down and stared at the ceiling to enjoy it.

"That sounded rough," the redhead said.

Ellen glanced at the woman sitting across from her, whom she'd forgotten was there.

"Want me to break his fingers?"

"Do I ...?" Ellen's day-brain took a second to process the offer. "No! My God, why would you even say such a thing?"

"Simple. He hurt you — intentionally, I might add — and since you seem too timid to fight back, I thought I'd hurt him for you. Tit for tat and all that crap."

Ellen sat up and took in the mystery guest. She wore a sharp, black business suit, complete with a jacket, slacks, and polished shoes. Her white pressed shirt stretched at the buttons to contain an enormous bosom disproportionate to her otherwise trim, boyish figure.

The smell of gun oil mixed with her delicious human scent. The redhead was carrying.

Ellen gulped. "Who ... who are you?"

"Slayer."

"Seriously?"

"No, but mark my words, someday I'll make it stick. In the meantime, you can call me Dela. Dela Suther."

The name sounded familiar, but its significance escaped her. "Have we met?"

"People usually remember my killer figure and dazzling personality after first meeting, so I'd say not."

"That I believe." Despite her discouraging run-in with Favian, Ellen couldn't help smiling. "So what brings you here, Dela?"

"You."

"Pardon?"

"And Favian. And Rosetta. And your boss, Mr. Loudbritches." Dela grinned. "Pretty much your entire company. I've been here all day, watching."

"For the moment, I'm going to assume you have a reasonable explanation and not call security."

"On the contrary, you should have called security the second you saw a stranger sitting in your lounge. Or, at the very least, you should have asked who I was and confirmed it with whomever invited me. Gorgeous or not, I could be dangerous."

"I still think you might be."

"You're right, I am," Dela said. "But not to you."

"What if I'm the dangerous one? I'm a Nightwalker, after all."

"Oh, please! I have bunny slippers scarier than you."

"Sorry, can't picture you with bunny slippers."

"They were a gift."

Ellen stared at her. "You still haven't answered my question."

"Good catch, there's hope for you yet. I'm —"

Ellen's phone rang. She gawked when she saw who was calling. "Sorry, it's my ... my husband. Excuse me a minute?" She didn't wait for an acknowledgement before answering. "Hi, Paul. I didn't expect you to call this evening."

"Is this a bad time? I can call back later."

"No! I was just ... taking a break, so your timing's perfect. What's up?"

"I need to skip our therapy session tomorrow night."

"S-skip? But why?"

"I have errands that can't wait. Work's been crazy, and tomorrow night's the only time I can make it fit. You understand?"

"I ... I guess. I'll see if we can reschedule for Thursday night."

Paul sighed. "Thursday won't work, either."

"But we're still on for next week, right?"

"We'll see. Like I said, work's been crazy."

"Paul, I'd really —"

"Ellen!"

Hargreaves' shout made everyone in the office jump, except Dela.

"In my office, please." It wasn't a request.

"Coming!" Ellen silently swore and uncovered the microphone. "Sorry, I have to go. Can we talk about this later?"

"If you'd like."

"I would. I ... I love you."

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"Yeah. Talk to you later, and ... good luck with Hargreaves."

"Thanks." Ellen could almost see him smiling on the other end, which was heartening. She hung up and gave Dela an apologetic smile. "Seems I've been summoned."

"Want me to go in your place? I could break his fingers instead of Favian's."

Ellen ignored the joke and dragged her feet to Hargreaves' office, her mind still on Paul. "Confusing" was the only way she could describe her marriage. One minute, Paul would rebuff her affections, the next minute, he'd sympathize or joke, just like he had before The Change.

The therapy he wanted to skip was the only thing holding them together. They'd been going for four weeks now, ever since the day she'd returned to Boston. Convincing her to return to Boston after her Liberation instead of crying in a corner had itself taken a month of intensive therapy from the Perrin Foundation's Nightwalker reintegration counselors. She'd sacrificed the comforting, unwavering affection for her sire, willingly severed the mental bond connecting her to the other Nightwalkers — her blood family — and stumbled through her reintegration without their reassuring presences in her head, all so she could have the pleasure of being ostracized by her family, coworkers, and friends.

And of getting yelled at by Hargreaves.

Ellen closed the door behind her and stood before his desk with her hands behind her back. "Mr. Hargreaves?"

Hargreaves stopped pacing, wiped his mustache, and put his hands on his hips. Veins throbbed on his balding head. While intimidating to most people, they only made Ellen hungry.

"Has Rosetta made it clear how important this account is for Brenton?"

"Yes, sir."

"And how important that data analysis is for the pitch?" His veins throbbed larger.

Ellen's stomach growled. "Yes, sir."

"Then explain to me," Hargreaves said, volume raising with every word, "why you're sitting on the goddamned couch talking to a security consultant instead of analyzing the data!"

"It's ..."

Ellen cut herself short. He hated excuses, so telling him she was waiting until sunset for her foggy day-brain to clear would only make him angrier.

"Sorry, Mr. Hargreaves. It was irresponsible of me. I'll get right on the analysis."

"Damn right! I expect more from my marketing directors, Ellen — and especially from you. I shouldn't have to tell you how to do your job!"

"No, sir. You shouldn't."

"Have that analysis in Rosetta's hands in an hour, and it had better sparkle like the Crown goddamned Jewels. Go!"

Too stunned to reply, Ellen nodded and made her exit.

The redhead was back on the couch when Ellen returned to her desk. She collapsed into her chair.

An hour was impossible. One-third of that would be spent waiting for the sun to go down so she could think straight. Even then she'd need the rest of the night — and as much of the morning as she could stay awake for — to collate the data, analyze it, and put it in a presentable form.

Ellen needed help. She needed it now.

And there was only one person she knew who could pull off a miracle like this. She opened the company directory, found Ken's phone number, and dialed.

"This is Ken." His voice was raspy, just as she remembered.

"Ken! Hi, it's Ellen Bloom in Public Relations."

"My God! I heard you were back, but after your ... your accident six years ago, I hardly dared to believe it was true. Sorry I haven't come upstairs to visit. I've been leaving work early, so ..."

"It's okay, though I'd love to catch up some evening."

"Definitely. It's like you're back from the dead."

"Mostly back. You may be in for a shock when we meet, but I promise I'm still Ellen."

"You sound like her to me."

"I ... Thank you. That means a lot."

"What can I do for you?"

"Oh, right. I, um, heard you're leaving Brenton. It's none of my business why, unless you want to talk about it over dinner sometime, but if you're still open to doing work favors, I could use one."

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"Sure. I'm just watching old reruns at home. What do you need?"

Given Rosetta's painting of Ken's departure, Ellen hadn't expected such willingness, but she wasn't about to question it.

"Long story short, I have a mess of data files to collate, which I'm guessing you already have the scripts for. I can do the analysis myself, but until it's collated ..."

"Say no more. Send the files over and I'll have the collated data back to you in twenty minutes."

"You will? Oh, thank you!"

"Consider it a 'welcome back' present, though I'll take you up on that dinner you mentioned. There's a restaurant near my place that supposedly has great hemofruit tarts."

"You're on." Ellen wanted to pinch herself, but if this was a dream, she didn't want to wake up. "Ken, you have no idea how much of my bacon you're saving."

"Having worked for Hargreaves myself, I have a pretty good guess. Just keep your chin up."

"I will."

Ellen hung up with a smile. The euphoria she felt from talking with Ken — from finally connecting with another workmate, even if he was leaving the company — was almost as good as a hemofruit buzz. Almost. She sent the data files to him with a note of thanks and sat back.

Orange-and-vanilla perfume. The squeak of vinyl high-heeled shoes.

Rosetta was coming.

Ellen quickly pulled up her disaster-of-an-attempt at collation on her computer and pretended to be concentrating.

"How's the analysis coming?" Rosetta sat a shapely thigh on the corner of the desk.

"Oh, fine. Fine! I mean ... it's a lot to process, but I'll have it done soon."

"How soon?"

"Pretty soon."

"Within the hour?"

"Um ..."

"It's okay, Ellen."



Rosetta pulled a chair over and tentatively touched Ellen's knee, but instead of flinching at the feel of Ellen's cold flesh, her warm fingers stayed put. The scent of fear was strong, but not as strong as last time. She was getting used to Ellen.

First Dela, then Ken, now Rosetta. The well of happiness in Ellen's chest overflowed, spilling into a full-fanged smile she couldn't contain. Rosetta's fear-smell spiked at the sight of her canines. She gulped, but kept her hand on Ellen's knee. Her warmth was soothing.

"I-I overheard your conversation with Hargreaves," Rosetta said.

Ellen nodded. Even through closed doors, it didn't require a vampire's keen hearing to eavesdrop when Hargreaves shouted.

"I have enough work to do on the presentation for another three hours at least without the data analysis," Rosetta said, "so take your time. Hargreaves won't care as long as the presentation is ready for tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay." Tears of gratitude and relief flooded Ellen's vision. "Thank you, Rosetta."

"Don't mention it. You're good at what you do. I'd be lying if I said having a Nightwalker around isn't ... disconcerting, but I'll get used to it eventually, as will everyone." She glanced at Favian across the office, bathed in the last rusted rays of dusk. "Favian was harsh, and while I can't excuse his actions, I'll try to smooth things over so we can at least work together."

"You will?"

"I can't promise a miracle, but yes." Rosetta patted Ellen's knee. "This situation is probably more difficult for you than for us, so what I'm trying to say is ... I want you to succeed, and I've got your back."

"You can't know how much that means to me."

Ellen risked taking her hand, and was rewarded when Rosetta didn't wince at her cold touch.

"Thank you. Thank you!"

Rosetta smiled, but her fear-smell didn't waver. The rhythmic sound of her heartbeat grew louder. "Thank me by helping me nail this client tomorrow. That analysis is key to the entire presentation. Let's show everyone how you single-handedly wrestled the data into submission, then you'll be a hero at Brenton Marketing — my hero!"

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"Single-handedly. R-right. Can do."

"It may even open some doors. There's a vacant vice president position, you know."

"There is?"

"Mm-hmm. It was advertised today. I'm surprised you didn't know."

"I haven't finished reading my messages — and by the looks of things, I won't get through them tonight."

"That's the spirit."

Rosetta winked, withdrew her warm hand from Ellen's, then rejoined Favian on the other side of the office.

Ellen thumped her head on the desk.

She was so screwed. Not only was Rosetta expecting her to process the data herself, Ellen had done the one thing Rosetta had explicitly told her not to and enlisted Ken's help.

The scent of gun oil grew stronger. Dela sat across from her and crossed her arms under her large bosom. Her freckled face broke into a grin. "A VP position, huh? Gonna go for it?"

"I'll be lucky to have a job tomorrow, at this rate." Although there wasn't much for Ellen to do but wait, no one else knew that, so she pulled up her useless spreadsheet on the computer and pretended to be busy.

"You mean the Ken thing? Jeez, don't sweat it. I'd have done the same in your shoes. Knock their socks off with the presentation and no one will give a crap who you tapped to get the stupid analysis done."

"How ... how did you know about him?" Ellen glanced at the couch area, which was well out of earshot from her practically whispered conversation with Ken.

"Same way I heard your not-so-great attempt to woo Favian, and you buying your husband's lame excuse about errands so he can get out of a therapy session he clearly doesn't want to attend."

"Hey! That ... that's personal!"

"What I don't get," Dela said as if Ellen hadn't spoken, "is why you — a Nightwalker who could snap any of their necks before they could raise a finger — continually act like you're less than they are."

"You have to be a Nightwalker to understand. Having that kind of leverage isn't empowering. It's isolating. Everyone's afraid

of me, and lording my abilities would only make it worse. Besides, meek is how the All Mother wants us."

"Bullshit she does."

"Bullshit? You're not a vampire! How the hell would you know?"

"She told me."

"You've ... met the All Mother?"

"She borrows my toothbrush from time to time, so yeah, I'd say so." Dela leaned forward. "The problem with the mental connection you all share — or used to share, in your case — is that messages get weaker the further down the hierarchy they go. You're what, an Eighth?"

"Yes." Ellen started to ask how she knew, but with twenty million Nightwalkers in the world, and each sire having approximately twenty sirelings, simple math said most Nightwalkers were bottom-rung Eighths.

"That's seven sires between you and the All Mother. Lots of room for garble."

"Okay, so what did the All Mother mean, then?"

"Following The Change six years ago, when the number of vampires in the world jumped from thousands to millions, the All Mother feared war with humanity. A single incident of Nightwalker violence could have incited global panic, triggering a genocide many times worse than the Holocaust. And it still could. To prevent that, the All Mother begged Nightwalkers everywhere to use only peaceful tactics for conflict resolution, even if their lives depended on it."

"You've only proven my point," Ellen said. "The All Mother needs us to be non-threatening for the sake of everyone."

"Physically! You can't break people's arms, but you're not a dog, for chrissake. You don't have to roll over and do whatever humans say. You may have pointy teeth and a pasty complexion, but, thanks to the Liberation, you're Ellen Bloom again! A Marketing Director, wife, and mother with a mind of her own who has as much right to be here as anyone else."

"But they don't see me that way!" Tears streaked her vision. She swiped them away. "No one does."

"Because you're not giving them any reason to."

Ellen stared at her, sniffing. "I'm ... what?"

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Dela grabbed the name plaque from her desk and pointed at Ellen's title. "What does this say?"

"Marketing Director."

"That's right, same as Rosetta's. And unless you slept your way to the top — which Rosetta may have — my guess is you worked hard to get it. Would the Ellen Bloom of six years ago, who busted her ass for this title, let others make her feel she wasn't worthy of a VP position?"

Ellen closed her eyes and tried to remember. It seemed like a lifetime ago that warm blood flowed through her veins, when things other than pleasing her sire awakened her passion. She sighed and shook her head.

"Don't sweat it. I forgot, it's still daylight out. Your head should be clearing right about ..."

Dela looked across the office, where Rosetta and Favian swam in dusk's dying rays. Shadows swallowed the light in a slow, inexorable march.

Seconds later, the sun was finally gone.

Ellen sat up straight. The weights pulling her eyelids disappeared. She felt fresh, invigorated, the cogs of her mind finally spinning at full speed.

And she remembered.

"No, I wouldn't have. I was driven, ambitious, inspired. That's the reason I was in Dubai when the water supply was polluted with the Nightwalker virus. A Saudi prince wanted to expand his business into the US market. The account was worth millions to Brenton. I called in every favor, pulled every string, so I could be the one to pitch. Landing them would have meant a guaranteed promotion, and I knew I could. I wanted that promotion so badly ... I would have done anything."

Dela broke into a freckle-splitting grin. "That's more like it! So, Ambitious Ellen, what's stopping you from taking that VP position for yourself?"

"To have a prayer of getting it, I'd have to land the client tomorrow. To land them, I'd have to be the one pitching."

"So?"

"Are you blind? Look at me! No human client is going to take a pitch from a corpse-cold, black-eyed, pasty skinned freak!"

Dela's grin disappeared. "Careful. Self-pity is one thing, but you've just crossed the line and insulted the entire vampire race — including one of my best friends. I've punched lights out for less."

"Oh, I ... S-sorry." Something about the way the redhead carried herself told Ellen she meant what she said, no matter if the recipient was human or a super-strong vampire.

"Forgiven. And, now that your day-brain is gone, take a minute to compare the Ellen of before to the person who just whined like a mule in heat, then ask yourself again why people treat you differently. It may have less to do with your pointy teeth than you think."

Ellen wanted to tell her she was wrong — that the source of her misery was a cut-and-dried case of prejudice against Nightwalkers, or the All Mother's crippling request to be peaceful, or her unsympathetic husband and friends. Anything to lay responsibility other than where it belonged — which was square on Ellen's shoulders.

No one had forced Ellen to come back to work, nor to volunteer for all the menial tasks she should have been delegating to others. Brenton hadn't hired her back as an assistant. They'd hired her as a marketing director.

Except Ellen wasn't acting like one. The company hadn't failed her: Ellen had failed the company and her teammates by cowering behind her insecurity and not performing to her full potential.

She reached across the desk and touched Dela's arm, feeling lighter than she had since the day of her Liberation.

"Thank you. I didn't know it, but that sort of ... naked candor was exactly what I needed."

"My pleasure. Blunt is what I do best."

"And what is it you do, exactly?"

"I'm Chief Security Officer for —"

Ellen's computer chimed, signaling she'd received a message. Before, she wouldn't have cared. If she'd dropped everything whenever a message arrived, she would never have gotten anything done. But now was different. Most messages arrived while she was asleep, which made real-time receipt exciting.

In this case, it was doubly so. The message was from Ken, and it had the collated data file attached.

"Sorry," Ellen said, unable to take her eyes from the monitor. "Could you excuse me for a minute?"

"Take your time. I'll be around." Dela returned to the couch and plopped down with her legs draped over the arm.

Ellen had the file open before Dela had taken her second step. Ken had done an expert job organizing it, as she'd expected. Now that her mind was free, the numbers called to her, begging her to unearth their buried insights. In no time, Ellen had an array of colorful plots, graphs, and charts, each revealing different information. Together, they painted the picture she needed for the presentation tomorrow.

But there was one, glaring problem. From the messages she'd read about the pitch, the analysis failed to support Brenton's recommendations. Contradicted them, in fact. According to the data Ken had sent, the proposal would cost the client millions of dollars with very little return — a blunder that could destroy Brenton's reputation. While the client was almost certainly solvent enough to survive, it wouldn't earn Brenton any repeat business.

Worse, Rosetta — who'd supported Ellen despite her floundering — would be finished. Her tenure as a marketing director at Brenton may limp along but, after a disaster like that, it would never advance.

Ellen couldn't let that happen. She owed it to Brenton and Rosetta to fix this before the client laid eyes on that damaging presentation.

The first rule of analytics, she reminded herself, was to double-check her work before using it to make big decisions. Many an executive had been led astray by a careless analyst who'd pulled data from the wrong field, multiplied by the incorrect number of zeroes, or applied an average when they should have used a median. Ellen wouldn't cry wolf until she could count the teeth in its gaping maw.

A second pass confirmed the bad news, unfortunately, but left Ellen with a different worry. She couldn't point to a particular set of records, but years of working with market data told her the source data was off.

Ellen was hip deep in the file Ken had sent when Hargreaves' door swung open.

“Rosetta! Ellen! In my office.”

Ellen reluctantly pulled her mind from the data and, receiving a sympathetic shrug from Dela, marched into his office, followed closely by Rosetta. Favian never looked up from his computer.

Hargreaves paced behind his desk. “Tell me where we are. Ellen, have you delivered the analysis to Rosetta?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“We don’t have all night! Did I trust the wrong person with this task?”

“No, sir.” Masking her anger was easier as a vampire, since her face no longer reddened, though she had to keep her lips tight because her fangs were elongating again. “I’ve just run into a ... a snag with some of the data, and need a little more time to smooth it out.”

“It doesn’t have to be perfect, Ellen! It just has to support Rosetta’s pitch. Do I have to do it my goddamned self?”

“Of course not, sir. She’ll have the analysis soon.”

Hargreaves turned his red face to Rosetta. “And you! Where’s that outline you promised me twenty minutes ago?”

“Sorry, sir.” Rosetta brushed her long black hair over her shoulder with trembling fingers. “I-I got distracted with some alternate explorations. I’ll send the most promising one to you immediately.”

“Damn right you will! And, after I finish correcting your inevitable mistakes, you’ll have the first draft in my inbox by two a.m. Now out of my sight, both of you!”

Ellen walked with her away, but with a cautious glance at Favian, she stopped short of the invisible line where the sunlight had been.

“Ever feel like you’re a rookie in a cheesy cop film?”

Rosetta laughed. “Every day. I should be used to it by now, but ...” She stared at her shaking hands.

“Don’t worry, I meant what I said. You’ll have that report soon.”

“I know. I trust you.”

“I ...”

Ellen swallowed a lump of gratitude and nodded, then returned to her desk. Favian had studiously ignored the entire exchange.

Apparently, Dela hadn’t. She sat across from Ellen, put her feet up on the desk, and glared at Hargreaves’ office.

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"I don't know why you put up with him. I'd have kneed that guy so hard, he'd be using his nuts for eyeballs."

"The real tragedy is that being an asshole isn't against the law," Ellen said. "As long as he's not discriminating against anyone, or threatening them physically, he can legally yell as much as he wants."

"He's an equal opportunity shouter, I'll give him that. Even Favian got an earful before you arrived. Doesn't mean I wouldn't knee him anyway."

"That, ironically, would get you fired."

"Not me. I don't work for him. My boss wouldn't be happy, but she'd get over it. She always does."

"Wait, you're ... not working for Brenton? But Hargreaves said you're a security consultant."

"Chief Security Officer. And no, I'm not here on Brenton's behalf."

"Then whose?"

"You know that big client you're trying to land tomorrow ...?"

A pit dropped in Ellen's stomach. "Y-you're kidding!"

"Nope, but don't worry. I'm here to make security assessments about Brenton's facilities and personnel, not give them business recommendations. Anything not security-related can stay between us."

*And I've been confiding in her!*

"Does Hargreaves know?"

"I doubt it. But your CEO does, so it's not like I'm spying on anything." Dela grinned. "If you do tell Hargreaves, can I come? I'd love to see the look on his face."

"I'm pretty sure it would end worse for me than him. Look, this may sound rude, but I think it's more appropriate if you wait on the couch, where you were."

"Even though I can hear everything you and your work frenemies say from there anyway?"

Ellen had forgotten about the redhead's mysterious vampire-like hearing. If she wasn't already convinced Brenton was a circus act, however, hanging around Ellen a little longer wasn't likely to change her opinion either way. Besides, Ellen liked her.



"Fine, you can stay. But unless I figure this out, tomorrow's meeting may be a waste of your employer's time."

"What's the problem?"

"The data. It indicates our recommendation to the client will be wrong, but I don't trust it."

"The stuff you got from Ken?"

"Right. See this chart?"

"Seems flat — though, frankly, I have no idea what I'm looking at."

"No, that's exactly the problem. I'd expect to see spikes here, here, and here, but there's nothing." Ellen sighed. "I've been staring at market data for years, and it just doesn't do this. Someone ... changed it."

"Your boy Ken? Rosetta warned against him. Guess she was right. Want me to pay him a visit?" Dela cracked her knuckles.

"Ken was my first thought, but I cross-checked his collated file with the source files I sent him. They match. It wasn't him."

"Must have been the person who sent you the original files, then."

Ellen nodded. She felt terrible even considering it, but, given the blowup between them earlier, there was no one else it could be.

"You gonna let Hargreaves know?"

"And tell him what? That he should raise the alarm because my spider sense is tingling? No, I'll need proof. Or a confession, at the very least."

"I assume icepicks under the fingernails is a no-no?"

Ellen nodded with a shiver.

"Then, since neither of our hacking skills are up to par, that leaves one option."

"Which is?"

"When I'm not sure if someone's guilty, the best way I've found to get a confession is to pretend I am. It's amazing what people admit when they think they're caught." Dela leaned back and looked at Ellen with a wicked grin. "That, or I seduce them until they tell me what I want to know."

"My chances there are slim to none, so I'll take option one."

Ellen gathered her courage and walked across the imaginary sun line to a conference room on the other side of the office, where

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she held the door open. "Favian," she said, using the same tone she did when her kids were in trouble. "A word, if you don't mind?"

Favian looked at her for the first time since their altercation, but remained seated. Ellen frowned at him and gestured inside. Discomfort twisted his face. For a moment, Ellen thought he wouldn't come, but he picked himself up and shuffled past her into the conference room. Ellen shut the door behind him.

Unsurprisingly, Favian sat as far from her as possible — at the end of the long table across the room — his fear-smell at new heights. Ellen sat at the other end. Disappointed as she was at his betrayal, she wouldn't be the monster he thought she was and use his fear against him.

There were so many things Ellen could have said, but the only thing that came out was, "Why, Favian?"

His mouth worked silently. His discomfort turned to denial, then anguish. Ellen held her tongue, showing him only the disappointment that stabbed her gut. She was startled when a tear ran down his cheek.

"You were my idol," Favian said, his voice rough. "My role model, my mentor, my ... my friend. Then you went to Dubai. I begged you to take me with you. Begged! But you wouldn't. You had to do it on your own. Then *The Change* hit, and ..." His lips quivered. "I found your name on the registry. I knew you'd been infected and ..." Favian pounded the table. "Six! Years! For six goddamned years I thought you were lost forever!"

"Favian —"

"There was a funeral service, Ellen. Did you know that? A tribute to the person we all knew and loved, whom we thought would never return."

"Yeah, I ... I heard."

"Everyone came. Your husband, your kids, your coworkers, the CEO, even Hargreaves. Everyone! You should have heard the speeches. There wasn't a dry eye in the church ... especially mine."

"I'm not sure what to say," Ellen said, fighting her own tears, "nor why exactly you're angry with me. Is it because I chose to go to Dubai and got infected? Or do you ... do you wish I was still a regular Nightwalker, blindly loyal to my sire?"

Favian stormed to his feet. "I'm angry because you didn't take me with you!"

"But you would have been infected!"

"I know! I ..." He collapsed in his chair, as if the outburst had drained him. "Even knowing that, I still would have followed you."

"Are ... are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Favian rubbed his eyes and laughed — the first laugh she'd heard from him since returning to Brenton.

"Probably not. That wasn't a confession of my undying love, rather my loyalty to the person I respect more than anyone in the world."

"Respect? Like, present tense?"

He nodded and laid his head on the table.

Ellen sat back, her head swimming. "I didn't know. I mean, I knew we worked well together, but ..." She shook her head. "Those are some big shoes to fill."

"I know, but you asked why, so there it is."

"Actually ... that wasn't what I meant."

Favian sat up, his eyes wide.

"Don't get me wrong! Your friendship is important to me, and I'd have worked up the courage to ask eventually. But when I asked 'why' earlier, I was referring to the data."

"What about it?"

Ellen sighed. Favian wasn't the saboteur. She was sure of that now, even before his innocent answer, so she filled him in on what she knew, including her decision to use Ken despite Rosetta's warning.

"What I need to know," Ellen said in closing, "is where you got those data files."

"Rosetta sent them to me, forwarded from Hargreaves. Where he got them is anyone's guess. They're all from different vendors."

"Rosetta and Hargreaves ... thanks." Ellen had her suspicions which of them was the culprit, but there was an easy way to find out for sure. As for the other problem ... "Favian, I can't change what I did, nor can I fix being a Nightwalker. Going to Dubai alone was selfish of me. If it's any consolation ... had I known how you truly felt, I would have taken you along. Of course, you also would've

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become a Nightwalker and put your friends and family through hell for the last six years, so take that as you will."

Favian lit up. Ellen hadn't realized how much she'd missed his smile.

"So, am I allowed on the sunny side of the office now?"

"Not yet," Favian said. "Until we figure out who tampered with the data, assuming it was tampered with at all, we should probably resume business as usual."

"Then wipe that smile off your face, mister. We just had a shouting match, and I'm sure everyone heard." Ellen opened the door and gestured him out. He scowled, but, unlike last time, he didn't keep his distance. He brushed her on the way by, his fear-smell all but gone.

Ellen struggled to keep her joy sealed behind a serious mask, which she held in place all the way to Hargreaves' office.

"Mr. Hargreaves," Ellen said once admitted, "sorry to bother you, but I finally found the root of that data snag I mentioned earlier. One of the files Favian sent me is corrupt. He said they originally came from you, so I was wondering if you could send them to me directly to see if the corruption is in the original file, or if it happened downstream."

"Sure, whatever," Hargreaves said. "But one bad file shouldn't prevent you from finishing the analysis."

"It's an important file, sir, but you're right. If your copy is corrupt, I'll continue without it."

Hargreaves sat at his computer. "That was one hell of an argument you had with Favian."

"Yes, sir, but I promise it won't interfere with our work tonight."

"See that it doesn't." He tapped the keyboard. "There, it should be in your inbox. Now go make use of it."

"Thank you, sir." She went for the door.

"Ellen ..."

She stopped, surprised by his unusually soft tone. "Sir?"

"I can't pretend to understand what you're going through, being a ... what you are and all. If Favian or anyone else is giving you shit for it ... tell me, and I'll fix it."

Ellen was so shocked by the kind offer that it took a second to find her voice. "Thank you, Mr. Hargreaves. I really appreciate the support."

"You can show your appreciation by doing what you do better than anyone I've ever worked with, and help Rosetta create a pitch the client can't refuse."

"I ... yes, sir. Count on it."

"I am." With a gruff clearing of his throat, he waved her away.

Dela was waiting when Ellen returned to her desk, her green eyes sparkling.

"Holy cow! Did I choose the right night to hang around or what?" She chucked Ellen's arm. "Was that a compliment I heard? Who'd have guessed Mr. Hardgripes had a soft side!"

"We'll see if it was genuine in a minute." Ellen opened the files from Hargreaves, zeroed in on the suspicious data, and compared a few rows to the numbers Favian had sent. "Well, I'll be damned."

Dela whistled low. "Not the result I was expecting. What are you going to do?"

"First, I'm going to fix my graphs. Then, for Brenton's sake, I'm going to make sure this never happens again."

"Sounds like fighting words. How can I help?"

Ellen flashed a fanged grin. "So glad you asked. This client of ours — the people you're protecting tomorrow — how flexible is their schedule?"

"It's packed solid. Brenton is one of four companies in Boston they're visiting that day."

"Starting when? Would they be open to coming in before dawn?"

"They're flying from the West Coast and have an early start already. With a three-hour time difference, any earlier and they may as well not go to sleep tonight."

"A dinner presentation, then?"

"They already have one scheduled, but they don't want to go. It wouldn't take much to convince them to come to Brenton instead."

"Not here. We'll book a nice restaurant with a private room." Ellen scribbled on a notepad. "Here's the proposed address if you'd like to do a security check. I'm sure I can get us in, even on short notice."

"Thanks. So ... you want me to pull the trigger on this thing?"

"Please. I know it's inconvenient, but, if the client intends to go with Brenton, moving this meeting is in their best interest."

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"Won't Mr. Hardgripes get his knickers in a twist if you don't check with him first?"

Ellen smiled. "A wise redhead recently reminded me I didn't earn this position by being meek — or by asking permission. I earned it by putting myself out there and doing what I knew was right."

"Can't argue there. I'll make some calls and let you know." Dela winked. "Go get 'em, Ambitious Ellen."

Ellen cracked her knuckles and did just that. Updating her graphs took only a few minutes, even without Ken's help. When she was satisfied with the results, she packaged her analysis and sent it out, then straightened her business jacket, and strode across the invisible sun line.

"Hi, Rosetta." Ellen sat on the edge of her desk, just as Rosetta had done, flaunting her ashen, venous calves, and deliberately flashing her fangs in a smile. For once, she wished they were elongated, but she wasn't angry enough for them to push down. Not yet. "How's the presentation coming?" Unsurprisingly, it wasn't on her screen.

"As well as can be expected. I've taken it as far as I can without your data analysis."

"Can I see it?"

Rosetta smoothed her skirt. Though her face was composed, Ellen heard her heart jump.

"I'd prefer not. It's a first draft, which means it isn't ready for consumption — especially by a connoisseur, such as yourself."

"Oh, it can't be that bad. Why don't you show it to me anyway?"

"Ellen, I ... I don't feel comfortable showing it in this state. You're a harsh critic, and ..."

Ellen leaned forward until her unnaturally large, black eyes were level with the other woman's.

"Rosetta, open the presentation."

"You're too close," she said, trembling. "Back away or ... or I'll call Hargreaves!"

"Firstly, even if I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn't, because the All Mother would put my proverbial head on a spike if I broke so much as a button on your expensive suit. Secondly, be my guest. Call Hargreaves. I'm sure there are several gems in that presentation of

yours that, in relation to the analysis I just completed, he would find extremely interesting.”

Rosetta’s eyes darted around like a cornered animal. “Favian, tell her! You wouldn’t want a Nightwalker looming over you like this, right?”

“Actually, I’ve had a change of heart.” Favian stood next to Ellen, so close their shoulders touched, and crossed his arms. “Do as she asked and open the presentation. I’d like to see how you’ve used my fine designs.”

Rosetta looked at them, her mouth hanging open. “You’re back for two weeks — two weeks, Ellen! — and you’ve already taken him from me, just like you used to take everything else.”

“That’s what this is about? You sabotaged my data because you’re ... jealous?”

“How dare you speak down to me like that!” Rosetta jumped to her feet, fists shaking. “You stole Favian from me. Stole! Just like you swiped the director position seven years ago. I had seniority, dammit! It should have been mine, but you stole that, too! You steal everything! Even the VP position I’ve worked so hard to ...” Rosetta collapsed, mascara running down her cheeks.

“What about it?”

Rosetta dabbed her face with a tissue. “People have been whispering your name ever since the opening was announced this morning. I’m surprised they haven’t already given it to you.”

“So, to change their minds, you tried to make my analysis look bad.”

Rosetta tapped a few keys. A presentation appeared on the screen. “I had this other proposal ready, supporting the correct data. While you were sleeping, I would have identified the problem with your analysis, fixed your mistake, and saved the day.” She ground her teeth. “How! How did you know the data was skewed? I spent hours tweaking those numbers so they wouldn’t look suspicious!”

“For the same reason, I suspect, that I got my director promotion before you. I’m good at what I do — and I don’t need to cheat to prove it.”

Rosetta glared at her. “What are you going to do? Turn me in? No one else is qualified to make this pitch, and the meeting is during the day, when you’ll be fast asleep.”

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"Already taken care of." Ellen glanced at Dela, who gave a thumbs up. She breathed a sigh of relief. "The meeting's been moved to tomorrow night. I'll be doing the pitch, not you."

"Liar! Hargreaves would never agree. You're a bloodsu— ... a ... a Nightwalker!"

"Yes, and I'm still the best damned closer Brenton's ever seen. Despite you having the correct data from the start, I can see from here that your recommendations are wrong — a problem the presentation I create tonight will correct. My advice — and I strongly suggest you take it — is to call in sick tomorrow and consider your career options."

Rosetta gaped. She looked at Ellen, then Favian, perhaps seeking sympathy or a chance of redemption, but found none. With a huff, Rosetta stuffed some personal items into her purse, grabbed her long black coat, and left the office.

Ellen stared after her. She detested Rosetta's betrayal, but fond memories of years past still left an empty ache at the thought of not seeing her again.

Dela plopped into a chair, beaming. "Gotta say, I'm a little disappointed I didn't have to follow her into an alley and beat the truth out of her. Otherwise, I'd say that went pretty well."

Favian blinked. "I'm sorry, and you are...?"

"Dela Suther. Or Slayer, if you want brownie points."

"Wait ... Dela Suther, as in Mark Suther's wife?"

"Ouch! Points deducted for defining me by my hubby. But yes, that Dela. Impressed?"

"Are you kidding? I have a copy of *Orwing Assault: The Offensive That Saved Humanity* in my car! W-would you sign it?"

"Of course! Anything for a fan. I also do photo ops."

Favian sprinted for the elevator, face alight, as if he'd just won the fanboy lottery.

Ellen stared at her in wonder. The top few buttons of Dela's blouse were open, giving Ellen a peek at the top of her right breast. A small rise in her skin, about an inch square, marked the home of her famed computer implant. It sure explained the redhead's confidence and extraordinary hearing.

"The Change," Ellen said. "You were there when ... when Orwing gave the order to pollute the water supplies."



Dela's confident smile faltered. "I was. So, if you're angry about your condition, there's someone partially responsible for it right in front of you. Go ahead, yell away."

"Yell? If it wasn't for you — all of you, including the All Mother — that catastrophe would have been a million times worse! Why on earth would I yell at you?"

Dela sighed. "There aren't many things that keep me up at night, but a recurring one is what I could have done differently — something I could have said or done to prevent the order from going out. Twenty million Nightwalker virus victims, and all their friends and families, might have been spared a whole lot of misery."

"I ... I can't imagine the burden you carry."

"I survive. Best I can do at this point is to help the victims recover, one Nightwalker at a time." She winked. "Speaking of ... what's next for you?"

"You mean apart from talking Hargreaves into letting me do the pitch, and working Favian through the night to get the new presentation ready?" Ellen shook her head. "Just my family. If Paul doesn't want to go to therapy, I won't pressure him. But that doesn't mean I'm giving up."

"Need help? One of my many talents is also matchmaking."

"Thanks, but you've already given me the boost I needed. I can take it from here."

"Sounds like you have a plan."

Ellen nodded. "I was reluctant to go out with him when we first met, but Paul was relentless. Flowers, balloons, singing telegrams, and that smile ..." The memory filled her with joy and longing. "He never lost hope, and it paid off. Now it's my turn. I won't give up on him."

It would take time, Ellen was sure, but she would earn back her husband's affection the same way she had earned everything else: with hard work, integrity ...

And by simply being Ellen Bloom.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Southwick decided to dabble at writing late in life, and quickly became obsessed with the craft. He grew up in Pennsylvania and moved to a farming town on California's central coast during elementary school, but it was in junior high school where he had his first taste of storytelling with a small role-playing group and couldn't get enough.

In addition to half a lifetime in the software development industry, making everything from 3-D games to mission-critical business applications to help cure cancer, he was also a Radiation Therapist for many years. His technical experience, medical skills, and lifelong fascination for science fiction became the ingredients for his book series, *The Z-Tech Chronicles*, which combines elements of each into a fantastic contemporary tale of super-science, fantasy, and adventure, based in his Bay Area stomping grounds. Ryan's related short story "Once Upon a Nightwalker" was published in the *Corporate Catharsis* anthology, available from Paper Angel Press.

Ryan currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife and two children. You can get in touch with him and see more of his work by visiting his website *RyanSouthwickAuthor.com* or his Facebook page.

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