

## THE PROTECTOR

"My God, look at you, girl! You're a mess! Mud on your knees, blood on your hands and face! Did you get into a fight?"

"I wish!"

"Well, don't you want to clean yourself up?"

"I have to come in first. May I?"

"Of course, you live here ... oh, yes, come in! Come in! Silly me, I keep forgetting. I'm so used to you just popping in, like you did every day for, what was it, like ten years already?"

"Yes," said the girl quietly as she entered the apartment and headed for the bathroom. "Some things do take some getting used to." She emerged a few minutes later, her hands and face scrubbed clean, her blue jeans somewhat less so, and said, "Won't you sit down?"

"So?" asked the woman, sitting down on her couch. "What happened to you?"

"A lot of things we never told you about," answered the girl, sitting down beside her.

"Like what?"

"Like, for starters, remember all those times Bob came home from school with cuts or bruises or both and said he'd got into some sort of accident in the school playground?"

"How could I forget?" said the woman with a smile. "That son of mine has been rather accident prone these last five or six years."

"That's what he wanted you to think."

The smile vanished instantly from the woman's face. "What do you mean, Marg?"

"I mean, Ethel, that those weren't accidents. Most of them, anyway. He got beaten up regularly by three of his classmates. The ringleader was Larry Bormann, the class bully. He beat up on lots of kids, but Bob was his

favourite target. His two lackeys were Eugene Wallace and Reginald Schwartz."

"Omigod, why didn't Bob tell me about it? I'd have reported those three hooligans to the school principal and they'd have got what was coming to them, believe me!"

"That's exactly why he didn't tell you. The bullies would have thought that he had ratted on them and beaten him up even worse. That's also the reason why he never fought back. He avoided them when he could, and when he couldn't avoid them he appeased them so that they wouldn't hit him quite so hard. He was so relieved when they all flunked out of school! School life would have been so much happier for him if he had returned there after the Christmas vacation, but at least he was rid of them - or so he thought.

"One evening just last week, when the two of us were walking in the park, the three bullies attacked him again. As usual I scolded them, and as usual they mocked me and dared me to do anything about it. After all, they thought, what could I do? I was only a girl, and a skinny one at that. Of course, they didn't know about my encounter with Draco. Now that I had the power, I wasn't about to let them humiliate my boyfriend any longer, especially after he risked his life to save mine. I slugged Larry in the face and knocked him out cold. The other two bullies got scared and ran away, and so did Larry when he finally came to."

Ethel put her arms around Margaret and said, "I'm proud of you, Marg. You did the right thing."

Margaret put her arms around Ethel and held them there. Her body was cold but her embrace warmed Ethel emotionally. "I thought so too - until today," said Marg gently. "Half an hour ago, Bob told me that he was going to the shopping mall, where he'd meet a lot of new people, to buy supplies for me. The shortest route to the mall passes through the park. I warned him not to go through the park without me, but he was sure that the bullies wouldn't dare attack him at night - I could show up at any time. I wasn't so sure, but I didn't want to hurt his pride by insisting. Instead, I shadowed him at a respectful distance.

"Sure enough, when he disappeared behind some trees in the park, I heard him scream. I'd never heard him scream that way before. The bullies must have really hurt him. I know now that they were making him scream to get me to come to his rescue so that they could eliminate me and then they could keep on picking on him, but at the time I couldn't see

the weapons they were carrying. I rushed to the park, screaming curses at them to scare them away. When I paused for breath, I heard Bob yell, 'Marg, don't ... ' and then - brace yourself, Ethel - I heard a gunshot."

It was Margaret's embrace that prevented Ethel from fainting, or worse. "Was he ... was he ... ?"

"Yes. You don't survive a bullet wound in the heart. It was Larry who did it. All three of them had guns, but from my hiding place I saw that his was the one that was smoking."

It was several minutes before Ethel found her voice again. "Now I understand the state you were in when you knocked on the door. You did what Bob said he wanted you to do when he died. We expected it to take at least sixty years, not two months!"

"Ethel, I know you can't provide for me without Bob's help, and I don't want to be a burden on you any longer."

"But where will you go? How will you live?"

"It will be better for you if you can truthfully say that you don't know those things. You have my cell phone number. Feel free to call me at any time. And as much as I hate to leave you at a time like this, I have no choice. I don't want to be around when the police come."

Margaret extricated herself from Ethel's embrace and packed a few things. The two of them embraced once more, and then Margaret departed. Ethel watched through the window until Margaret had disappeared and then called the police. She answered their questions, identified the body, and then waited for justice to be done.

The three boys were arrested. Larry Bormann was charged with second-degree murder and held without bail. His two lackeys were charged with being accessories to murder and released on bail. The trial of the three suspects was scheduled for three weeks after the murder. It was held on schedule, but Larry was the sole defendant.

Ethel was too poor to hire a lawyer; so the prosecution was handled by the District Attorney. His first witness was the forensic expert who had examined the body. He testified that the bullet found in the body matched the gun found in Larry Bormann's apartment.

The cross-examination took an unexpected turn. "How much blood would a boy the size of the deceased have in his body?" asked the defence attorney with a smile.

"He was rather small for a sixteen-year-old boy; so I'd say about four quarts."

"How much blood was there in the body?"

"Almost none."

"Were you given a description of the crime scene?"

"Yes."

"How much blood did they say was on the ground?"

"Almost none."

"Were there any other wounds through which blood could have flowed?"

"No."

The smile disappeared from the defence attorney's face when he heard this answer. "No further questions," he said.

The second witness for the prosecution was Ethel. After the usual introduction, the prosecuting attorney asked Ethel to say in her own words what had happened. She acknowledged that all of her information came from her son's girlfriend Margaret Cessford and then repeated what she had learned almost word for word.

The defence attorney said in a gentle voice, "I understand how hard it is for you to testify, Mrs. Rosen. It would have been a lot easier for you if the sole witness to your son's murder had been here to testify instead. Is there something the court could have done to make that possible?"

"Well, yes, they could have held the session at night."

"I see. Unfortunately, that would have disrupted the schedules of some of the members of the jury; so I'll have to test the reliability of the absent witness by asking you questions instead. Did she see the defendant shoot your son?"

"No. Her view of him was blocked by some trees."

"Then how did she know it was the defendant and not one of the other two boys?"

"They approached her hiding place and she saw them. They all had guns, but Larry Bormann's gun was the only one that was smoking."

"Did the murder take place during the daytime or at night?"

"At night."

"I see. Now, how much does this Margaret Cessford weigh?"

"About a hundred pounds."

"Now take a good look at the defendant, Mrs. Rosen. How much would you say he weighs?"

"About a hundred and eighty pounds."

"Does he look fat to you or muscular?"

"Muscular."

"Is Miss Cessford a martial arts expert?"

"No."

"On the night when she rescued your son from three boys, at least one of whom outweighs her by eighty pounds and is muscular rather than fat, was she carrying a weapon?"

"No."

"And did your son participate in the fighting?"

"He didn't have to."

"I see. Now, you heard the forensic expert testify that there was almost no blood either on the ground or in your son's body. What happened to the four quarts of blood, Mrs. Rosen?"

"My son told Margaret that he wanted her to drink his blood when he died so that something of him would live on in her."

"Hmmm. So this Margaret Cessford can only go outside at night, she has superhuman night vision, she has superhuman strength and she drinks blood - very much like Draco. Did she ever meet him, Mrs. Rosen?"

"Yes, last Christmas Eve. She was setting up her telescope in the courtyard of the apartment complex to gaze at stars - she and Bob were very much into astronomy - when Draco attacked her. She screamed, Bob heard her, and he grabbed a knife, rushed outside and killed him."

"Quite the hero, your son! If he had boasted to the world about his feat, he would have earned the respect of everyone around him, and he'd no longer be picked on. Why didn't he?"

"Unfortunately he didn't arrive in time to stop Draco from biting Margaret. He was afraid that Draco's bite would infect her and turn her into a vampire like Draco. He didn't want her to be hated and feared like Draco was; so he decided to keep the whole thing secret. We dragged Draco's body up to the sun roof and left it there. By the time it was found, the sun had risen and all they found were ashes. Sunlight does that to vampires."

"And did she, in fact, become a vampire?"

"Yes - after a few days."

The defence attorney's tone suddenly changed from gentleness to a contemptuous sneer as he asked, "Isn't it possible, Mrs. Rosen, that my client only wounded your son and that Miss Cessford applied the coup de grace?"

"Coup de grace?"

"That she killed him. Vampires do that, you know."

"She would never do such a thing! They'd been best friends for ten years - ever since she and her father moved next door to us - and had already become lovers. They'd been planning to get married as soon as they graduated from high school. Her father kicked her out as soon as he discovered her ... condition - he was afraid for his reputation - so I took her in. My son and I gave her as much of our own blood as we could, and the rest of it we bought from whoever would sell to us. It was costing us

more than I earned; so the two children dropped out of school and got jobs. It was all perfectly legal since they had just turned sixteen. They both worked night shifts: Margaret because she couldn't go out during the day and Bob so that they could be together during their off hours. Between us we were able to keep her nourished. For her to kill him would have been biting the hand that fed her."

"All very touching, I'm sure," sneered the defence attorney. "Now, Mrs. Rosen, once your son had been killed and could no longer provide for her, where did she go and how did she live?"

"I don't know. I asked her but she wouldn't tell me."

"But you could have figured it out after Eugene Wallace was murdered the way only a vampire would do, especially since you knew that Draco had been dead for more than two months and that there were no other vampires in the area. Didn't you suspect Miss Cessford?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, why didn't you call the police before she murdered Reginald Schwartz as well?"

"You can't blame me for their deaths!" Ethel blurted out, bursting into tears. "They would have been alive if Larry Bormann hadn't murdered my son! We could have kept Margaret well enough nourished that she wouldn't have had to kill anyone to survive and she wouldn't have hated them enough to kill them. Their blood is on Larry's hands, not on mine!"

"On the contrary, Mrs. Rosen. It's in Margaret Cessford's belly."

There were a few nervous titters and some audible expressions of disapproval from the spectators. "Mrs. Rosen has already suffered a bereavement," admonished the judge. "I ask you not to add to her suffering with your tasteless attempts at humour." His intervention elicited applause.

"Very well, your Honour," said the defence attorney. "I have no further questions for this witness."

Ethel was asked to step down from the witness stand. As she took her seat, several spectators said comforting words to her. The prosecuting attorney announced that he had no further witnesses to call

and the judge asked the defence attorney whether he had any. "Yes, but first I'd like to speak to you privately."

"Very well, meet me in my chambers. Court is recessed for fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes later, the judge took his seat and announced, "It is my ruling that the rest of this trial be held in camera. All representatives of the media, as well as Mrs. Rosen, will please leave the courtroom until they are called to return."

An hour or two later, Ethel was summoned back into the courtroom. The atmosphere had changed almost palpably. Some of the spectators stared at her, and when she sat down, the people nearest to her abruptly changed seats. A few minutes later, the members of the jury returned to their places. As the cameras rolled and the reporters scribbled, they announced their verdict: not guilty! Some spectators applauded; the judge silenced them with a stroke of his gavel. Larry shook hands with all the members of the jury. Some of them clapped him on the back and one of them said, "Good luck, Larry!" but quickly put her hand to her mouth when the judge made a motion with his head in Ethel's direction. Nobody would speak to Ethel, and all the people she tried to speak to turned their backs on her.

Well, there was one person to whom Ethel could turn for consolation. "Marg, I have terrible news. Larry Bormann got away with murdering my son!"

"Ethel, you must be feeling horrible!" came Margaret's soothing voice over the phone, "But don't worry, Ethel, justice was only delayed for a little while."

"There's worse. After I testified, I thought everyone was on my side. Then the judge booted me and all the media out of the courtroom until the jury was about to return. Everyone applauded their verdict and congratulated the murderer - one of the jurywomen even wished him good luck - and nobody would even talk to me. They acted as if they thought I killed my own son and tried to frame poor Larry Bormann! I tried to persuade the prosecuting attorney to appeal the verdict, but he mumbled something about having to live in this city and walked away from me."

"Hmm," said Margaret slowly, "Good luck, did she say? I'm afraid that changes things. I have an idea how the defence attorney managed to pull it off. It's only a hunch, but if I'm right, we'll both be far better off if



you can truthfully say that you haven't the slightest idea what went on in that courtroom during your absence, and if nobody else ever finds out that you're still in contact with me. For your own protection as well as mine, I'm asking you to commit my cell phone number to memory, burn every piece of paper on which you wrote it and delete it from the memory of every telephone into which you entered it. If you need to phone me, do it from a payphone, but first make absolutely sure that you aren't being followed. Trust me on this one - I know what I'm doing."

"All right, I do trust you, Marg, and thank you for your emotional support. I needed that!"

"Thank you, Ethel, for putting me up while you could."

After a brief exchange of consoling words, the two women concluded their conversation.

One evening a few days later, Ethel's telephone rang. Was it Margaret? "It's the police," said a friendly and familiar male voice. "I'd like to come over and ask you a few more questions. If you plan to appeal the verdict, any additional information you can give us can only help you." A few minutes later the doorbell rang. She opened the door, expecting to see the policeman to whom she had spoken on the phone.

But it wasn't the policeman. It was Larry.

In terror, she tried to slam the door shut, but Larry was too quick and too strong for her. He forced the door open, grabbed her, dragged her outside, threw her to the ground and started kicking her all over her body. Hoping that the policeman would come soon, she screamed, "Help! Police!" over and over until she heard another familiar voice.

But again it wasn't the policeman. It was Margaret, screaming threats at Larry. Surely, thought Ethel, he would run away scared, but no! Instead, he broke out in a broad grin as he continued kicking her. Why was he so unconcerned?

Suddenly Ethel heard several gunshots, the thud of a body hitting the ground and several male voices cheering. Horrified, she found the energy to scramble away from her tormentor and rise to her feet. And then she saw the policeman and several other men, each dressed all in black and carrying a rifle, emerging from the bushes and taking off black masks and oversized goggles.

"You were here all the time!" gasped Ethel in disbelief. "You just used me as bait to get to Margaret just as Larry had used Bob! How could you be so cruel?"

"We weren't originally planning to involve you until you made it necessary," answered the policeman.

"Yeah, until today I used myself as bait to pay her back for killin' my two friends," added Larry. "I figured she'd wanna pay me back for killin' her wimp of a lover; so I went out at night to lure her into comin' for me, and these here cops hid out nearby an' waited for her."

Suddenly Ethel had a flash of understanding. "So that's why they let you get away with murdering my son!"

"Did you just figure that out now? I thought you knew it from the get-go, 'cause we stayed outside for a few hours every night, but she never showed up. An' then, a couple of hours ago, someone found a body drained of blood an' told the cops. I figured you must have tipped her off an' she started drinkin' people's blood to stay alive until the cops gave up on her an' then she could come for me; so I came up with this new plan."

Ethel recalled her phone conversation with Margaret. She herself hadn't known what had happened in the courtroom during her absence, but apparently she had given enough information to enable Margaret, who was far more intelligent than she was, to guess her way to the truth. The dear girl had known that it was dangerous for her to attack Larry, but she had sacrificed herself out of love for Ethel!

Ethel glared at Larry, her heart filled with unendurable pain and rage, and he glared right back at her, a sadistic grin on his face. He had made her son's life hell, he had deprived her of the two people she loved best, he had assaulted her, and she was determined that this time she was going to bring him to justice. Her nostrils dilated in fury, she screamed at him, "You monster! You won't get away with what you did to me!"

"Don't even think of taking him to court again," sneered the policeman. "The real monster was your pet vampire. By this time tomorrow everyone will know that she killed an innocent person, thanks to you and your big mouth, and that she would have killed many more of them if we hadn't stopped her, and they'll all agree that everything he did to you, you richly deserved."