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It was a short ride home from Lou's house, round the village green with its duck pond and benches, past the local shop and the Drowned Rat pub, and out towards the wide, flat fields on the other side of Lower Donny where Mo's house stood alone, flanked by a handful of poplar trees. Mo hardly noticed the journey, it was so familiar, but when she turned down the quiet lane that led to her house she gasped suddenly and slammed on the brakes, stopping just in time. A man had walked out in front of her. Walked out? Appeared, more like, as if from nowhere (or, perhaps, the hedge). A stranger. Mo knew everyone in Lower Donny, but she'd never seen him before. He said nothing. He stood perfectly still, staring at Mo with hooded black eyes. She felt goosebumps ripple over her skin.

'Sorry, excuse me,' she muttered, turning her handlebars to cycle around him. He moved and stood squarely in front of her bike again, blocking her way.

'Can I help you?' Mo asked.

'Yes, by becoming Vampire Queen,' said the man in a deep, rich voice. 'You are the Chosen One.'

Mo blinked hard.

'Sorry, what? Chosen One? Chosen to do what?'

'Rule this entire land, as queen of all the vampires.'

'What vampires? I didn't know there were any vampires.'

'Vampires are everywhere,' said the man. 'They live among you humans, on the margins of life, in the dark corners and flickering shadows.'

'Really?' said Mo.

'Yes, really,' the man spat back. 'And you have been chosen to rule over them. With you as leader, there can be more vampires, better vampires. This can become great and glorious vampire stronghold! Proud vampire homeland! You can pep it all up, yes?'

'But vampires don't exist,' Mo said, shaking her head. 'This is a joke, right? A prank?'

She glanced over her shoulder, expecting to see someone with a camera, capturing this hilarious gag.

'No joke,' the man replied. 'I am Bogdan, chief emissary to the great and mighty Vampire King of the East. It is an honour to meet you, Mo.'

Oh my god, he knows my name, Mo thought. How does he know my name?

'The Vampire King gave me a task,' he continued, becoming chattier. '"Bogdan," he said, "go see what's happening in Great Britain. It's so far away and the weather's rubbish, but there must be some vampires

there. Take a look. If you think it's worth adding to my territory, find a king that can rule there on my behalf." This is what I have done.'

'Wait, you said "king". *Find a king*,' Mo said. 'You've found me. A fifteen-year-old schoolgirl.'

'Well, yes, traditionally vampire leaders are male, but we can make exception.'

Mo bristled. 'Women can work in senior positions too, you know. This is the twenty-first century. Ever heard of equality?

Bogdan shrugged.

'So if you wanted a king – so predictable, by the way, pick a man for the top job – why have you chosen me?'

'I see something in you,' Bogdan replied.

'That's a first,' said Mo. 'Mostly no one sees me at all.'

'I have been around long time, worked with many powerful vampires. I have talent for discovering Chosen Ones,' said Bogdan. 'Olaf the Sucker who ruled here in the 1700s? I found him. Bran the Thirsty. Also me. Geronimo the Unquenchable. Me too.'

'All men,' Mo muttered.

'All exceptional,' Bogdan replied firmly. 'I knew they were Chosen One first second I saw them. I know the same for you, Mo. I sense something deep within you, a strength, a force. I can almost smell it.'

He leaned towards Mo and inhaled deeply. She ducked backwards, away from his pale face and piercing dark eyes.

'Are you sure it has to be me? I mean, there must be lots of other possible Vampire Queens out there. Why don't you advertise the role and see who applies? I could help you with the interviews.'

'No!' exploded Bogdan, making Mo jump. '*You* are Chosen One. *You* must be Vampire Queen. *You* and *only* you. Use your strength, Mo. Use it! Become the queen you should be!'

Then he thrust out his hand and clenched his fingers, like he was milking something.

'You will have so much power. More power than you can dream of. Be as ruthless as you like!' he said.

'Rulers should be fair, not ruthless,' Mo muttered.

'You will have eternal life too. Nice, yes?'

'I guess,' Mo said. 'I do have a lot I want to achieve. University, an internship at the UN, and I'm thinking a job in politics or a human rights lawyer . . .'

'Yes, yes,' said Bogdan, waving away Mo's words impatiently. 'I am talking about a life of *real* power and riches and everyone in the land fearing you. Also, immense physical strength. Don't you want that?'

Mo shrugged.

'You could rip someone's head off.' He clicked his fingers. 'Like that!'

'That's a horrible idea. Why would I want to do that?'

'Don't knock it till you've tried it,' Bogdan said, winking and smiling. 'Come now. Leave this sad, damp, tragic little village –'

'Lower Donny is not sad and tragic!'

'No, believe me, it is,' said Bogdan, 'and I should know. I've seen a few sad, tragic villages in my time. Anyway, enough! Leave this dingy, miserable . . .'

'I was born here, you know,' Mo fumed. 'Yes, I am looking forward to growing up and leaving it one day, but still. How dare you turn up, literally out of nowhere, and say mean things about my home?'

'Ha ha, yes! This!' Bogdan exclaimed, grinning and clapping his hands. 'This spirit! This fight! This is what we are looking for. This is why you are chosen. Claim your throne and lead this land into a new era of vampire greatness. One bite, and you will be transformed. You will be majestic! Invincible! Unstoppable!'

Bogdan threw his arms wide and tipped his head back, laughing. It sounded like someone squeezing a crow.

'Well?' he said, finally. 'It's a pretty cool-smart offer, yes? What do you say?'

Mo sucked in a deep breath, folded her arms across her chest and frowned hard. Her eyes flickered over Bogdan, taking in his intelligent pale face, his neat hands and well-manicured nails. Then she spoke.

'I'd like to see some ID, please.'

'ID?' said Bogdan. 'What is this ID?'

'Identification,' said Mo. 'How do I know you are who, or what, you say you are?'

'I am Bogdan!' said Bogdan, looking hurt.

'You don't look much like a vampire,' said Mo. 'I don't see any fangs.'

'Oh, sorry, I have little switch here, on back of neck, makes them come down.' He reached behind his head and fumbled around in his hair for a second, and then collapsed into laughter.

'I am making little laugh with you is all,' he said. 'No, there's no switch. Ha ha ha! Humans always fall for that. In fact, fangs naturally appear when they are needed, at mealtimes. Otherwise, normal teeth, see?' He grinned.

'But your clothes look so ordinary,' Mo said.

'You were expecting a cape? I never wear capes. So sixteenth century,' Bogdan sniffed. 'Also, my luggage containing all my finest clothes is still on its way here from the East. My familiar is bringing it.'

'But why a suit? A dirty one. There's a stain on the left lapel,' said Mo, pointing. 'Looks like ketchup.'

'When I first arrived here, I was unsure how to dress,' Bogdan explained. 'So I looked for a great and powerful human man, to discover what such a masterful figure wears. I saw a huge image of a mighty ruler, standing by many splendid vehicles. He was called the Used Car King! Ah yes, I said to myself, I must dress this way.'

'The Used Car King? You mean Clive Bunsworth from Middle Donny? Posters of him in all the bus shelters?' Mo said, trying not to smile.

'Clive, yes,' said Bogdan. 'A most delicious man. *Delightful* man, I mean.'

'He gave you his suit?'

'Not exactly *gave*,' said Bogdan, smiling awkwardly. 'Let's just say he doesn't need it any more.'

Mo shivered. Her eyes wandered back to that ketchup stain . . .

'Anyway!' Bogdan exploded, suddenly impatient. 'Enough talk of Clive Bunsworth! Forget Clive Bunsworth. Clive Bunsworth is nothing to us. Let us talk of you, the Chosen One. Becoming the Vampire Queen of these islands is your destiny.'

'Well, I think you'll find getting amazing GCSEs, then excellent A levels and then going to a top university is my destiny.'

'Nonsense!' said Bogdan firmly. 'To rule is your destiny. Do not fight it!' He stared intently at Mo, his eyes blazing, the moonlight gilding his grey hair.

She cleared her throat. 'Well, thank you very much for your kind offer, Mr Bogdan,' she said. 'Obviously, being unstoppable and majestic sounds interesting, but I would like some time to think about it. It's a big decision, after all. Could you come back tomorrow?'

Bogdan sighed. 'Really? This is super-excellent offer. I don't see problem here.'

Mo didn't budge.

'All right! If I must,' Bogdan said. 'I will await you here, tomorrow.'

Then he bowed deeply, clicked his fingers and was gone, as though he had evaporated.

Mo let out a long breath. She laughed nervously and looked around her. Had anyone else just seen this vampire guy? What a joke, right? But there were no other witnesses. She was alone. Maybe she'd been dreaming. Or she was dehydrated. She'd been in the library too long, hadn't drunk enough water. That would explain it, wouldn't it?

After all, vampires didn't exist. Fact. (Mo loved facts.) They belonged in folklore, stories, films and TV. And in all the folklore and stories and films and TV, the vampires were exotic and alluring and the humans fell under their power in two seconds flat, and no one asked the vampires for ID and the vampires did not dress as used car salesmen. So, Mo reasoned (Mo loved reason), as the person she had just met looked and behaved nothing like how a vampire should look or behave, he absolutely definitely couldn't be one.

And yet . . . And yet . . . While Mo told herself that what had just happened could not have happened, it had – happened, that is. It shouldn't have, but it had. Deep down inside, Mo sensed that she had met a vampire. It was unexpected, hard to believe and definitely not part of any plan – and this was a problem, because Mo loved plans.

The plan Mo loved, tended and nurtured the most was the one she had made for her life – The Plan. She

was working towards a bright future completely of her own making. Getting there involved ignoring Tracey Caldwell when she called her a neek. ('That's a cross between a nerd and geek,' Lou had explained, with an apologetic smile.) It meant not listening to her dad, when he said she should work in his carpet business after GCSEs, or her mum, when she said Mo should never leave Lower Donny because 'it wasn't safe out there'. It meant keeping her head down, studying hard and showing the world how strong, smart and brilliant she was.

What it absolutely did not mean and had never meant was signing up for a future as Vampire Queen, a future offered up on a Tuesday evening in October by some allegedly undead creature of the night in a dodgy suit, who may or may not have jumped out of a hedge.

Mo shook her head, but still the words 'Chosen One' seemed tattooed on her brain. This is crazy, Mo thought. I spend my days trying not to be noticed, getting on with my life, sticking to The Plan, and then – BAM! I'm suddenly spotted, selected, *chosen*. Me! Mo Merrydrew. How weird is that?

Weird and also wrong, Mo quickly told herself. Yes, wrong. And unfair too. To get anywhere in life, you had to work hard. That's what she believed. That's what The Plan was about. You couldn't be picked out at random and launched into greatness. That wasn't how it worked. That wouldn't be right.

With that thought, Mo plonked her bike helmet firmly on her head and zipped up her high-visibility cycling gilet with slightly trembling fingers. Then she fixed her eyes on the lights of home, twinkling through the trees up ahead, and pedalled towards them, fast.