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Opening extract from

The Reformed Vampire Support Group

Written by

Catherine Jinks

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The Reformed Vampire Support Group

Catherine Jinks

Quercus

Chapter One

Nina was stuck. She didn't know what to write next.

So far, her teenaged captive had been dragged into a refrigerated meat locker by two thugs armed with a gun and a boning knife. But Zadia Bloodstone was already waiting for them. Hanging upside-down from a meat hook, wrapped in a long, black cape and covered by a thin layer of frost, Zadia had cleverly disguised herself as a harmless side of beef. Only when she'd spread her arms wide had the crackle of breaking ice announced her presence.

Bang-bang! Two bullets had promptly smashed into her ribcage. But Zadia wasn't troubled by bullets, because her vital organs could regenerate themselves at lightning speed. Somersaulting to the floor, she'd walked straight up to the bigger thug and kicked the gun from his hand. Then she'd whirled around to fight off his friend. Within seconds, the two baddies had been knocked out – leaving a very important question unanswered.

What would the rescued boy do?

Obviously, he would be grateful. He might even be dazzled by Zadia's flawless face and perfect figure. But if he saw her sink her fangs into anyone's neck, he would also be frightened.

He would realise instantly that she was a vampire, and run for the door.

He would be unaware, at this point, that Zadia was a heroic crime-fighter who only preyed on lowlife scum.

Nina chewed away at a lock of her hair, thinking hard. She was in the middle of chapter eight. The room in which she sat was illumined solely by the glow of her computer screen; barely visible in the dimness were her brass bedstead, her Indian cushions and her lava lamp. A poster of David Bowie hung on the wall, curling at the corners. A small bookshelf contained multiple copies of *Youngblood (Book Two of the Bloodstone Chronicles)*, by someone called N. E. Harris.

Splashed across the cover of *Youngblood* was a glamorous, slinky young girl with white skin, black hair and ruby-red lips. She wore high-heeled boots and lots of black leather, as well as an ammunition belt. Her canine teeth were long and pointed, but she was stunningly beautiful nonetheless.

She appeared to be leaping from rooftop to rooftop, her black cape streaming out behind her.

'Nina!' somebody shouted, from beyond the closed bedroom door. Nina didn't respond. She stared unblinkingly at the computer screen, still gnawing at her hair – which was thick and dark, and cut in a heavy, clumsy, old-fashioned style that didn't suit her bony little face.

It was about time, she decided, that Zadia made friends with the boy she'd rescued.

Zadia hesitated, Nina wrote, *torn between her desire to punish the wicked and her need to reassure the tall, pale, handsome teenager with the big brown eyes*.

'Nina!' a distant voice called again. Ignoring it, Nina deleted the word 'pale'. Her hands on the keyboard were like

chicken's feet, all scaly and dry. Her skin was the colour of a maggot's, and her legs were so thin that her tights were wrinkled around the knees.

Her boots had flat heels on them.

'Nina!' The door burst open to admit a withered old woman in a quilted nylon dressing-gown. 'For God's sake, are you deaf? Father Ramon's outside – you want to keep him waiting?'

Nina sighed. She shut her laptop, moving sluggishly.

'All right,' she murmured. 'I'm on my way.'

'Aren't you feeling well?' the old woman wanted to know. She had the hoarse rasp and yellowed fingertips of a chronic smoker; her hair looked like a frayed clump of steel wool, and her scarlet lipstick was bleeding into the cracks around her mouth. 'Because if you're sick,' she said, 'you shouldn't be going.'

'I'm not sick, Mum. I'm fine.'

'That's what you always say, and you never are. Is your head giving you trouble?'

'No!'

'What about your stomach?'

Nina didn't reply. Instead she rose, reaching for her sunglasses – which shared the cluttered surface of her desk with a Pet Rock, a pile of vintage vampire comics, and a netball trophy awarded to the 'Junior Regional Inter-School Champions' of 1971. On a noticeboard hanging above the desk-lamp were pinned various faded photographs of laughing teenage girls.

If any of these girls was Nina, it wasn't immediately apparent. They were so sleek and glossy and bright-eyed that they could have belonged to an entirely different species.

'Are you nauseous?' her mother nagged. 'You are, aren't you?'

'There's *nothing wrong*,' said Nina, on her way out of the room. It was a lie, of course. There was always something wrong.

And her mother knew it.

'If you get sick, I want you to come straight home,' the old woman advised, as they descended a narrow wooden staircase together. 'Dave won't mind bringing you back early, if you can't stay to the end. And don't leave it till the last minute, the way you did before. Dave won't want you throwing up all over his sheepskin seat-covers again . . .'

Nina winced. It was true. She had ruined Dave's precious seat-covers. Was it any wonder that he didn't exactly beat a path to her door? Was it any wonder that she spent so much of her time in imaginary meat lockers with the stylish and vigorous Zadia Bloodstone? At least there were no uncontrollable bouts of vomiting in Zadia's world.

Nina pulled open the heavy front door of her mother's terrace house. Outside, the darkness was relieved only by the soft glow of a nearby streetlamp; stars were scattered like sequins across a coal-black sky. Yet Nina had already donned her sunglasses, which were big, heavy, wrap-around things that made her pinched face look smaller than ever . . .

You know what? This isn't going to work. I can't write about myself the way I write about Zadia. It's too weird. It's confusing. Next thing I'll get mixed up, and start making me do things that I can't actually do. Like turn into a bat, for instance. Zadia can do that, but I can't. No one can.

The plain fact is, I can't do anything much. That's part of

the problem. Vampires are meant to be so glamorous and powerful, but I'm here to inform you that being a vampire is *nothing* like that. Not one bit. On the contrary, it's like being stuck indoors with the flu watching daytime television, for ever and ever.

If being a vampire were easy, there wouldn't have to be a Reformed Vampire Support Group.

As a matter of fact, I was going to a group meeting that very night. Father Ramon had come to pick me up. It was a Tuesday, because all our meetings are held on Tuesdays, at 9.30 p.m., in St Agatha's church hall. And in case you're wondering why I couldn't have driven myself to St Agatha's . . . well, that's just one of my many problems. I still look fifteen, you see. I still *am* fifteen, when all's said and done, since I stopped ageing back in 1973, when I was infected. So I'd attract far too much attention behind a steering wheel. (Besides which, Mum doesn't have a car.)

As for the public transport option, Sanford Plackett has ruled that out. He's always ruling things out; you'd think he was our lord and master, the way he carries on. He's forbidden any of us to travel around Sydney on buses or trains, for instance, in case we stumble across something that Father Ramon would probably describe as 'an occasion of sin'. I suppose Sanford's worried that we might encounter a bleeding junkie rolling around on a station platform, and won't be able to stop ourselves from pouncing.

'You think you'll never succumb,' he once said to me, 'because you can't come to terms with your true nature. You refuse to concede that you're really a vampire, with a vampire's weakness. But you are, Nina. We all are. That's why we have to be careful.'

And being careful means not catching cabs. According to Sanford, it's too risky. Staring at the back of a cab-driver's exposed neck would be quite stressful for most of us – especially if someone's been bleeding onto the seats beforehand. Sanford also insists that no one in our group should go wandering the streets all alone. He says that we wouldn't stand a chance against the drunks and addicts and muggers on the loose out there. He says that everyone should follow his advice, because he's been around for so long and has so much experience, and because, although Father Ramon might be our group facilitator, even a priest with counselling experience can't be its *leader.* Not if he isn't a vampire himself.

That's Sanford's opinion, anyway. He's got a lot of opinions, let me tell you. And he's never shy about airing them, whether asked to or not.

He was already in the car when I reached it, because he can't drive either. People who grew up before the First World War rarely can. Back then, even doctors like Sanford didn't own motor vehicles – and he certainly couldn't risk learning to drive now. None of us could. We'd be exposing ourselves to the kind of official scrutiny that you need to avoid at all costs, when you're toting fake IDs. Most of the vampires I know have changed their identities at least once, and Sanford has done it twice, owing to the fact that he doesn't look his age (believe it or not). Despite his balding scalp and clipped moustache – despite his preference for three-piece suits and fob-watches – you'd never guess that he was a hundred and forty years old. The very fact that he's not six feet underground is a dead giveaway. And he's no different from the rest of our group, which is full of people living precarious lives, under assumed names, with forged papers.

It's a real drag, believe me.

'Hello, Nina,' he said, as I slid into the back seat of the waiting Nissan Pulsar.

'Hello, Sanford.'

'How are you, Nina?' Father Ramon inquired, pulling out from the kerb.

'Oh – you know. Nauseous. As usual.'

I didn't want to complain too much, because that's what vampires do. They complain too much. But I needn't have worried. Gladys did the complaining for me.

'I bet you're not as nauseous as I was last night,' she said, moving over to give me some space. 'I was trying to sell a timeshare, and I spewed all over the phone. At least a cupful of blood. It no sooner went down than it came back up again. I lost the sale and everything – didn't I, Bridget?'

'Oh, yes,' said Bridget, who was knitting. Bridget's always knitting. She was eighty-two when she was infected, so she can't do much else. Even climbing stairs can be a problem for Bridget, because of her hip joints.

There's only one thing worse than being a vampire, and that's being an elderly vampire with bad hips.

'Have you been taking your enzymes, Gladys?' asked Sanford, from the front seat. He craned around to peer at her. 'Every morning, before you go to bed?'

'Of course I have!'

'What about other treatments? Have you been drinking those herbal concoctions again?'

'No!' Gladys exclaimed, sounding defensive, though it was a perfectly reasonable question. Gladys goes about smelling weird, like a hippy, because she's always treating her manifold health problems with miraculous new oils or exercises or

meditation techniques. She even looks like a hippy, in her beads and her shawls and her long, flowing skirts. Having been infected back in 1908, she can't bear to expose her legs; ladies didn't do that sort of thing in the old days, and Gladys likes to think of herself as a lady – even though she was actually a common streetwalker. She also likes to think of herself as a *young* lady, despite her old-lady obsession with bowels and feet and joint-pain, because she was only twenty-four when she first got infected. But I'm here to tell you, she's about as young as a fossilised dinosaur egg.

'I haven't even been burning scented candles,' she whined, 'and I'm still getting that rash I told you about. The one on my stomach.'

'It might be a bad response to the supplements,' Sanford mused. 'I could adjust your levels a bit, I suppose. Have you had any dizzy spells?'

'Yes! This morning!'

'What about headaches?'

'Not since last week. But the other night one of my toenails fell off in the bath –'

At this point I could restrain myself no longer.

'Hey! Here's an idea!' I growled, my voice dripping with sarcasm. 'Let's all talk about our allergies, for a change! That'll be fun.'

There was a long pause. Father Ramon glanced into the rear-view mirror, shooting me one of those reproachful-yet-sympathetic looks in which he seems to specialise. Sanford sniffed. Gladys scowled.

'Well, what do *you* want to talk about, then?' she demanded. 'What have *you* been doing lately that's so wonderful? Watching re-runs of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?'

'I've been writing my book,' I said, knowing perfectly well what sort of reaction I'd get. And when Sanford removed his sunglasses briefly, to massage the bridge of his nose, I braced myself for the usual guff about how I was putting everyone at risk (even though I write under a pseudonym, and use a post office box for all my correspondence).

'Yeah, yeah, I know what you think of my books,' I added, before Sanford could butt in. 'Spare me the sermon – I've heard it all before.'

'They're not doing us any good, Nina,' he replied. 'People are scared enough already; you're only making things worse.'

'Zadia's not scary, Sanford. She gets fan mail. She's a *heroine*.'

'She's a symbol of your flight from reality.' This was one of Sanford's stock remarks. For at least twenty-five years he'd been telling me that I was stuck in the 'denial' phase of the Kubler-Ross Grief Cycle (rather than the 'anger', 'bargaining', 'depression' or 'acceptance' phases), because I had refused to embrace my true identity as a vampire. 'You feel compelled to invest vampires with a battery of super-human powers,' he said, making reference to Zadia Bloodstone, 'just so you can tell yourself that you're not really a vampire. You're living in a dream world, Nina.'

'No – *you're* living in a dream world.' I was trying to be patient. 'You talk to me like I'm still a kid, even though I'm *fifty-one-years-old*. Do you know how boring that can get?'

He did, of course. Everyone did, because I'd mentioned it often enough. It had been a good thirty years since our group's first meeting, so we knew each other pretty well by this time. We'd also covered every subject known to man, over and over and over again. It's something that tends to

happen when you don't mix very much with other people.

Sometimes I look around St Agatha's vestry on a Tuesday night, and I think to myself: *If I never see any of you ever again, I'll be a happy vampire.*

'You might have lived for fifty-one years,' Sanford chided, without even bothering to glance in my direction, 'but you're still a kid at heart. You're stuck in a teenage time warp. You still think like a teen. You still behave like a teen.'

'What – you mean like this?' I said, and flipped him the finger. Gladys giggled. Father Ramon changed gears abruptly, though his voice remained calm.

'Come on, now,' he remonstrated. 'That's enough. If you want to argue . . . well, you should at least wait until the meeting.'

Then Sanford's mobile phone began to trill. While he fumbled inside his jacket, I turned my face to the window. Outside, streetlamps were gliding past, illuminating the kind of neighbourhood that I've always enjoyed looking at. House-fronts were shoved up hard against the pavement. Though the gaps between shrunken curtains and broken cedar slats I could see flickering television screens, curling drifts of cigarette smoke, and people rushing from room to room, slamming doors.

But I couldn't see enough. I never can. I always get a fleeting glimpse of normal life before it's whisked away – before I'm back in a crowded car with a bunch of vampires.

'Oh. Hello, Dave.' Sanford had found his phone, at long last. 'Yes. Yes. Dear me. That is troubling. Yes, I'll tell him.' Addressing the priest, Sanford delivered Dave's news with solemn emphasis. 'Dave says that Casimir won't answer his intercom,' Sanford announced. 'They've been trying for

about ten minutes. Dave wants to know if you still have a spare key.'

'Yes, I do,' said Father Ramon. He sounded worried. 'Tell him I'll swing round.'

'Did you hear that?' Sanford addressed his mobile again. 'He said we'll swing round. Yes. Well, I hope so. All right. Yes, see you soon.'

He hung up.

I don't think anyone quite knew what to say, initially. Sanford appeared to be thinking. Father Ramon was obviously reassessing his planned route; he suddenly pulled into someone's driveway, and executed a rather clumsy three-point turn. Bridget was looking puzzled.

I couldn't even pretend to be anxious. In fact I was downright disgusted. 'Ten to one Casimir's out on the prowl,' I said at last, airing a very natural suspicion. 'I bet he's got his fangs into somebody *as we speak*.'

Boom! Instant uproar. If I had set fire to Gladys, I might have triggered a less impassioned response.

'Nina!' Father Ramon seemed genuinely horrified. 'That's a dreadful thing to say!'

'You shouldn't talk about people like that,' Bridget protested. I couldn't see her eyes behind the dark glasses that she wore, but her face was even whiter than usual. It was almost as white as her hair.

Sanford twisted around to admonish me.

'Casimir Kucynski hasn't set a foot wrong since being released,' he pointed out, in frigid accents. 'That was five years ago. Casimir's reformed, now.'

'Reformed?' I folded my arms. 'He sleeps in a *coffin*, Sanford!'

'He's doing his best, Nina. Casimir is a victim too – just like

the rest of us.' Sanford's tone became pompous. 'You know you're not the only one who was infected by Casimir. If the others have forgiven him, why can't you?'

'Because he's a creep,' I replied, without fear of contradiction. Casimir Kucynski *was* a creep. Even Sanford couldn't deny it. Though Casimir might have called himself a reformed vampire, he was anything but. He would go on and on about 'the good old days', when you could buy your very own slaves and kill them with impunity. He would do the most awful things with his tongue, which was long and blue, like one of those poisonous jellyfish. He had eyes like oysters, and teeth like tombstones.

In fact, if you want my honest opinion, Casimir had been a vampire for so long that he wasn't really human any more. It's vampires like Casimir who give other vampires a bad name. But try telling that to Sanford. Even now he maintains that it's important not to draw any kind of distinction between what's human and what's vampiric. He insists that vampirism is just another form of humanity – that there's nothing inherently wrong with being a vampire. And whenever I try to contradict him, he gives me a lecture about my attitude.

'Casimir is probably sick,' said Father Ramon, playing the peacemaker as usual. 'He probably can't get out of bed.'

'That's right,' Sanford agreed. 'He might be having an adverse reaction to his supplements. It's happened before.'

I could have reminded him, at this juncture, that Casimir had also suffered adverse reactions from fanging dead rats. But I didn't speak. Instead I stared out at the passing streetscape, which was undergoing a slow transformation: the turrets, avenues, door-knockers, mailboxes and iron rail-

ings were giving way to signage, awnings, plate-glass, traffic lights and concrete barriers. Pedestrians strolled along, swaddled in winter coats. Coloured lights flashed inside a corner pub.

I lifted my sunglasses, to get a better look at the festivities. It was only going to be a quick squint.

But Sanford nearly bit my head off.

'Nina!' he squawked. 'There are headlights everywhere! Do you want your eyes to start bleeding again?'

Welcome to my world. It's the kind of place where you can't do the simplest thing without risking a full-blown haemorrhage.

God I'm sick of it.