

## Vincenti's Family

I remember the sun rising as I opened my eyes up to it. If the legends were true I would have still had two left to me, but I have always controlled my own destiny and so I had decided this was to be my last. The orange light streamed across the horizon and over my shoulders. I felt the warmth of the sunshine on my face just as much as I felt the heat of the fire on my back. I would enjoy that day, one of the last as I was, before I became what I am now. That day began there, but my story begins long before.

I won't bore you with my childhood, other than to point out that it was actually rather unexceptional. I had friends come and go, and parents that were neither too loving nor too cruel. They had named me Stephen after my grandfather, but I never got accustomed to that name and at a very young age I renamed myself, secretly. I would never share that secret name with anyone, although years later I would discover that to some it was not a secret at all.

I had no fascination with either the dark or the light, the mystic or the mundane. In fact, I had wanted to be a doctor. It was a stupid childhood dream, the career choice of an eighth grade social studies project. In our classroom alone we had twelve lawyers, three doctors, two firefighters and seven police officers. Oddly enough none of us wanted to work in customer service at the age of eight, a job that two thirds of us would end up in, including myself. I had always felt I was destined to be something more, but I never seemed capable of getting there on my own.

I took the job in customer service three months after my graduation from college. It was a local children's publishing house. I had spent the previous three months burrowing a dent shaped very much like my body into a dusty old couch until I ran out of money. Having dried up all possible wells I realized I would have to make my own way in the world, and with the pretensions of college pushing me forward I went out to make my place. I ended up in a cubicle with three other people and the benefit of one free cup of coffee a day.

It was three years into my stint as a customer service when I got my first glimpse of something more. As a part of my daily duties I answered customer email inquiries, and on this day I became aware of something I had never noticed before. A name appeared. Jared. I knew I had seen that name before. No last name, no surname, just Jared. It was so familiar and yet I could not place it.

Three months later I would get my second glimpse of something bigger, something beyond. I was having cocktails one evening after work when it happened. I had been trying to get a girl I occasionally slept with drunk enough to sleep with me again and growing more bored with her by the minute. I don't remember the context of the conversation as I rarely listened to what she had to say when the name suddenly burned across my closed eyelids.

"What did you just say?" I hissed, grabbing her arm across the table.

"Ow, hey, what's your problem Steve, what the fuck?" she screamed, trying to escape my grip.

"I asked what you just said, what was the name you used?"

"What name? What are you talking about, Steve? I was telling you about my grandmother. You know, she recently passed away. You're hurting my arm, Steve, can you let go now?"

I dropped her arm and ran my fingers through my damp hair as I had begun to sweat profusely. Hadn't she just said Jared? Why would she say that name? How would she even know it? I don't remember leaving her at the bar that night, all I remember is being at the end of the pier near my apartment at midnight, racking my brain over and over again with just a name. Jared.

Within a few days the event settled within me and I returned to my normal pace of life. The name still sat on the tip of my tongue, in the shadows of my brain, but I was more or less able to move on from it. I would not see it in any more emails nor would I catch it in passing during any more conversations over the next several months. I thought I had regained the normalcy of my life.

Then came the office Christmas party. I had a few to many drinks and had gone back to my cubicle to catch my breath and attempt to bottom out with the gin I kept hidden in the drawer of my desk. Three or four drinks later I heard someone moving up the stairwell outside my cubicle. I had left the door partially open when I had snuck up earlier, and whoever was there didn't notice me as I was sitting in the dark drinking myself silly.

"Shouldn't we go back down to the party?" the girl slurred.

I recognized her as Suzy, my manager's secretary, and had witnessed her down two-thirds a bottle of Jack earlier in the evening.

"My boss is going to notice if I'm not there when he makes his annual speech. I'll get hell for it on Monday."

I moved out of my cubicle and started to cross the office quietly, towards the other stairwell on the opposite side of the office. The last thing I wanted to do was listen to Suzy moan like a teenager in heat before I went home alone. I was halfway across the office floor when I first heard his voice, the man who was probably half way down Suzy's pants just as I was halfway down my bottle of gin.

"*Where are you going, Stephen?*" he hissed.

I froze. He had just said my name, only he didn't say Stephen. He had said my other name. My real name. I must have been drunker than I thought. But the voice had floated across the room and directly to me, seeping into my blood and turning it to ice with those five simple words.

I must have misheard him. He couldn't have said my name. It wasn't possible. I stood my ground in the middle of the office, not even breathing, for what seemed like an eternity until Suzy spoke again, in response to whatever it was he had actually said to her.

"How do you do that with your voice, that throaty gurgle. I'm so glad I met you, Jared" she giggled, muffled most likely by his neck.

At his name I was suddenly alive with motion. I turned and ran back towards the stairwell door, bumping into a low-level filing cabinet that had recently been installed. I could see a slight motion through the crack of the door and the flash of Suzy's red dress. I heard her giggle one more time before slamming into the door and rushing into the empty stairwell. I looked up and down the stairs as quickly as I could, but could sense no movement whatsoever. I chose to go up as the party was below. Using some sixth sense I ducked my head in and out of each of the five floors on my way up to the roof, hoping for a second chance at seeing them but receiving no indication of their presence.

Suzy went missing that night. I had been the last one to ever see her, although I have never admitted that to anyone before. As far as the official record went, a man from

the mailroom named Joe Werner saw her last. She was stumbling into the stairwell that I would hear her in moments later, alone except for the remainder of the bottle of Jack she had been nursing all night. The name Jared was never mentioned in any of the reports and I was too afraid of being questioned to ever approach Joe Werner on my own.

I kept a low profile at the office after that night, but not low enough to draw undue attention to myself. I still attended all of the necessary office functions, more out of a hope for another glimpse of something out of place than anything. But it didn't hurt to fit in either, to pretend like I was still the same as everyone else.

Three months after that Christmas party, as winter turned into spring, I received a package in the mail. It was addressed to the name I had never used before, the name I had never told anyone else. The mailman left a note on the package asking if this was a friend staying with me as it had my address. He asked that I please mark my mailbox with the other person's name if they were going to have packages delivered to my address, that the next time he wouldn't be able to leave anything not specifically addressed to the names on the mailbox. I became nervous that the mailman would ask around my building for that name. That it would spread like a virus throughout my home and my life. I moved away from that place and any chance that others may discover that name within two weeks.

The package looked like it had been traveling for quite some time, although the postage stamp said it came from New York City and was dated three days previously. Within it I found a blurred picture of a man standing outside a bar I recognized from my last visit to the big apple two years before, one of those places a bit off the beaten path. He was talking to a woman that I recognized clearly, a woman I believed I had slept with the last time I had been to that bar.

In the picture she was wearing the same dress she had worn that night. I knew this because I had kept a picture of her in my top drawer for memories sake, and the dress has been permanently emblazoned on the inside of my skull ever since. And here she was again, two years later and still just as powerful as the first time I had laid my eyes upon her.

This girl had taken me that night. I had been powerless before her. It was my third night in New York and I still had two to go. I decided to go out for a beer, but a beer turned into straight bourbon and a light evening became a drunken binge. I was halfway through my fifth bourbon of the evening when she entered the bar, came right up to me and drank the remainder of my snifter out from under me.

"There's more of that back at my place" was all she had to say, slamming the snifter down on the bar, turning back around and walking back out the door.

I didn't have to be told twice, and obviously wasn't going to be. I yanked whatever cash was in my wallet out and threw it on the bar, rushing out the doors behind her. She was already in the back of a taxi, smoking with the door open, and not even looking at me. The smoke curled up around her auburn hair, hanging over her shoulders for a moment before being sucked out the window and into the night air. She wore no coat, although it was spring in New York, and her black dress clung to her body for warmth.

I barely remember getting into that cab, and I have no memory of what took place afterwards. I don't remember how I got back to my hotel, but I woke up the next morning with that picture and her lips on my mirror, caressing the glass as I could only

hope she had caressed me the night before. She did something to me all those years ago, something unforgettable while at the same time wholly forgotten. I never knew what it was but I kept the picture as a memento. Whenever I held it before my eyes I felt peace, happiness, heat.

As I looked at this new picture of her I felt something rise up inside of me again, something more than sexual passion or hopeless longing. It was the first time I'd seen her outside of my dreams and the other photograph in the two years since that night. I felt as though a bucket of warm water had been drenched over my body and at the same time I felt my blood turn to ice.

After staring at the picture for what seemed like an eternity I set it down on my kitchen table, two thumbprints pressed into either side of the 8x11 glossy. I was shaking so badly that I could barely get my hands back on the envelope, but I knew there was more. The twitch in my hands brought out the only other occupant of the package, tossing a small piece of paper onto the floor at my feet. I bent down and picked it up, only to see a copy of a driver's license with a picture of the blurred man in the photo.

This photo wasn't much clearer than the 8x11 had been. I still couldn't quite make out his face even though the picture seemed to be clearer. But I knew what I was looking at. Jared. There was a last name, but it didn't matter because I knew it wasn't his. This driver's license wasn't the real Jared, but it was a clue. A clue that he knew me. He had been there that night with the girl in the black dress.

I spent the next few years studying at the library. I didn't know then what I know now, but over time I started to get an idea. I would hear his name more often now, and each time it had less power over me.

It would come up most often in court cases. Kidnappings, murders, fires. A witness here or there would mention knowing a Jared, or mention his name as a co-conspirator in some heinous crime. He was an urban legend, an unsung villain that had spread across America. Most may not have been able to track him like I could. Sometimes he would be Jared Smith, or Jared Johnson, or Jared Hasbeth. But I could always tell that it was Jared. I knew.

I followed him by paper on his journeys across the continent. Miami in 1986. New Orleans in 1989 and 1993. Minneapolis from 1981 through 1983. But more often than not it was New York. New York appeared to be his home. His nest. He vacationed, just like you or me, and just like you or me he had a home. Someplace to hang his hat at the end of the day. Or his murder spree, as you would have it.

And so I began to see other patterns emerge. Patterns that fit with Old World legends about human bloodsuckers. Patterns that did not always fit with New World interpretations, that were melded from bits and pieces of long forgotten stories. These patterns were part of a magical world that had persisted since long before recorded history. And they had a family that I knew. A family that I belonged to.

I went to see several people who had met him and lived, to see the look in their eyes when they spoke of him. They knew that I had been touched by him as well, that we shared a kindred spirit. That we were family. I knew their names without being told, the names they really called themselves. They could feel him in me just as I could feel him in them. I collected my notes on him, studied what he was versus what legends say he was supposed to be. I prepared.

And so I decided I must go to New York. I was sure that this was all a part of his plan, that he knew I was coming. I was some kind of game to him. We all were, my family and I. He had taken many of us. I even found some of them. One was a girl named Natalie Woodson.

She had gone to New York five years before and ended up in an insane asylum two months later. She died three days after that, no one ever knowing what had really happened to her. I started at her hometown, where she had left from five years before. The town she had left on the same day that I had met the girl in the black dress.

She was a normal girl, nothing exceptional. She had dreams, none of which were ever accomplished. She took a job at the city post office where she sorted mail, lived alone in a crumbling apartment complex and never married. Reading her profile was like looking in a mirror. She became despondent about a year before she left, still functioning in society as she always had but those that knew her said something was missing. Something was gone in her eyes when she talked to them. Something vital.

I managed to get a copy of her file from the asylum, using a friend of mine from my customer service days. You'd be surprised at how many prison facilities order children's books, and at how some of the people in the corrections field just need a friend that isn't serving a life sentence for something unforgivable. But mostly you'd be surprised at how many favors those kinds of people have to offer when you're willing to lend an ear once a month. They have friends everywhere, and know how to get you whatever you need.

I got my hands on her file from the asylum, documenting the last three days of her life. It held exactly what I was looking for. At first I didn't think that it would, with page after page of her sleeping on her cot and eating her food. Her lack response to anything was all the file appeared to contain. But then, on the third day she asked to watch the dawn. She wished to be left alone in the yard for five minutes while she felt the sun on her face, according to her the residing head nurse.

By this time she had become so thin and wasted, her skin pale and dry, that the staff wouldn't have left her alone under normal circumstances. With the condition she was in and the speed of her deterioration there was no way they would let her out in the courtyard alone. A guard stood five feet away as she watched her last sunrise, recording all that she said. Over and over again, she repeated the words "thank you, Jared, thank you."

At the end of her file was a picture of her room. Scratched into the wall over her cot were two names, it looked as if they had been scraped there with her fingernails. One was Adele, which I recognized to be her true name. I only tell you this name because it no longer holds any power over her, she moved beyond it sometime later that year. The other name scratched into the wall would later save me in a small, circular hotel room.

I also found the address that she was originally picked up at by the state. It was three blocks from that out of the way bar I had met the girl in the black dress at five years previously. Adele was probably standing there the night I got into a cab with a girl I had never met before and would never see again with mortal eyes. I wonder if she felt me. I wonder if I felt her and didn't realize it. I wonder if I could have saved her, or if she was there to save me.

So I came to New York. I could tell you it was for Adele, or for any of the others I had found out about by then. But it was really for the same reasons they had come

before me. It was really for myself. I thought I was ready, at least I hoped I was. I had learned some tricks. And I had learned a name. And when it comes down to it, all you really need to know is a name to have power over something.

I got a hotel room right up the street from where Adele had been taken in by the state five years before, around the corner from the bar. I waited. I prepared. I got a room facing the East, with a large bay window so I could watch the sun come up, if I so desired. I never went out, but instead ordered food up to my room each night, even though I knew as the sun fell back behind me that I would be spending the night alone. I spent three months like this, waiting.

Then one night I knew. I'm not sure why or how, but I knew. I ordered a steak, bloody, with potatoes and wild rice soup. The one item on the menu I had been craving for three months and steadily avoiding. I ate like a king, with a bottle of bourbon to wash the meal down with. I was careful not to drink too much but just enough to keep my courage up. That was somewhere in-between nine and ten shots, and by the time he arrived my belly was thoroughly heated. I rose when he entered the room, even though I couldn't hear a thing from him. I moved over towards the wall, pulling a rope that let go a bar across the floor in front of the door.

*"What do you think that will do, A----. A circle does nothing to me, I know your name. I hold the power here."* He hissed, moving towards me.

At the mention of my real name I felt his presence wrap around me almost entirely. Knowing I had little time for action, I quickly sliced my palm with my steak knife, dripping a few drops onto the chalk rubbed into the floor by my feet. I chose this room for two reasons. One, because it faced the east and the rising sun. Two, because it was a perfect circle, a circle I had closed as soon as he stepped through my doorway and populated with small runes that few could decipher. The smell of my spilled blood excited him, and I felt his breath on the back of my neck.

*"Why do you excite me so? I've savored you these last five years, these last twenty-five years, readying myself for your arrival."*

His breath smelled like rotting meat that night. It was strangely thrilling as his voice drew me towards him, and I leaned backwards into his arms. I felt his bite, and more warmth than the bourbon could ever have given me, as he drew the blood from my neck.

I started to grow weak and he slowed, wanting to fully enjoy his meal. This next phase was crucial, as I could not let him sense what I had planned. I had trained in keeping my thoughts to myself, but I was at my weakest at that moment, when my desire for him was the strongest due to our mixed fluids. The only thing I had on my side was the hope that his desire for me was just as great, that he had sensed no danger upon entering the room, and so would move ahead with reckless abandon.

I stumbled forward, reaching for the chair and feigning a loss of strength in my knees as he swayed backwards in ecstasy. Now was the time, I was ready. I prepared myself to move quickly if need be and turned my head around towards him.

**"BUT I KNOW YOUR NAME AS WELL, VINCENTI, AND I BIND YOU TO THIS CIRCLE UNTIL IT IS MY WILL THAT YOU LEAVE IT!"** I yelled, speaking in a long dead language that I had spent the last two years learning.

I pushed my weight forward, towards the bay window and into a small area I had left out of the inner circle and now safely away from his reach. I had drawn two circles,

one within the circle of the room and the other along the edge of the perfect circle that was the room. The circle within was to bind him, the circle without to give me the strength I needed to hold him. My blood spilled on the line, where the two circles crossed and the runes spelled my name, was to tie my power to those circles. And to tie their power to me. Now I was in control of the situation.

He lunged at me and hit what seemed like a brick wall. His nose shattered and blood spattered onto my face and shirt, mixing with what little of my own had seeped from the wound in my neck. He began to curse me, opening his mouth, "Ang..."

**"BE SILENT, VINCENTI, UNTIL I ALLOW YOU TO SPEAK"** I cried in the same dead language, spitting on the floor in-between my feet and pulling myself up into the chair I had left by the window.

Vincenti stood looking at me and I was tempted to tell him to sit, but was too afraid that saying anything more might somehow break the spell I had cast over him. So I kept my mouth shut and watched him move about the room, feeling for any form of escape and finding none.

Eventually I stood, when I felt more of my strength return to me, and turned to the window where the sun would eventually shine upon my face. I stood and waited, looking down at my watch. There was five minutes left before the dawn rose as I closed my eyes in anticipation.