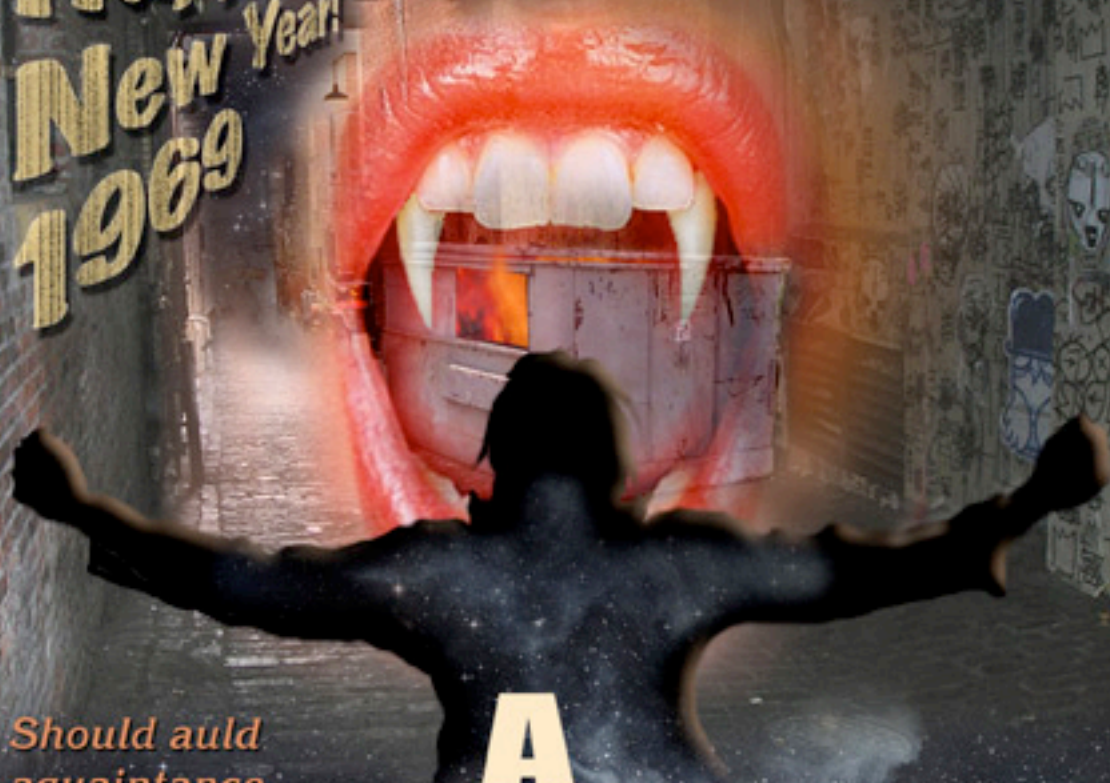


GARY VAL
TENUTA

Happy
New Year!
1969



*Should auld
acquaintance
be forgot
and never
brought
to mind?*

A
BITE
Out Of Time

A Bite Out of Time

By Gary Val Tenuta

Prologue

Fifteen minutes into the New Year, 1969

Vince Blaylock was the lead singer for an emerging folk-rock band called BMB – an acronym for Blind Man’s Bluff. He and his band were playing a big New Year’s gig at the funky old Backstreet Ballroom on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The building that housed the ballroom was built back in the 1940s and an odd urban legend had built up around it. Rumor had it that the old place was haunted and had originally been a social hangout for members of what was known as the *Blood Cult*. No one seemed to know exactly what the *Blood Cult* was but many assumed it had something to do with vampires. In fact – according to the urban legend – there was an unfinished space deep in the bowels of the building that had been sealed up years ago. That space was where the *Blood Cult* held strange ceremonies and partook of the most heinous activities imaginable. There still existed an airshaft leading from that dank old space underground to a hole in the outside wall of the building just above street level. Every now and then – as the story goes – people have seen bats come flying out of that hole in the outer brick wall of the building. Of course none of these sightings were ever first-hand. It was always a friend of a friend who saw one. Or it was the brother of so-and-so’s mother’s uncle.

Vince could have cared less about any of that. The only thing he cared about was that he and his band were booked to play there. Only the hottest bands ever got booked at the Backstreet and BMB had made it to the big time. Time. Timing was everything. These were strange times, tumultuous times. *The times they were a-changin’* as Bob Dylan duly noted with his inimitable nasal twang delivery. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, Dr. Martin Luther King had only recently been assassinated, followed almost immediately by the assassination of Robert Kennedy, and the Viet Nam war seemed like it would never end. Three months earlier millions of people participated in the biggest anti-war protest in U.S. history and BLB released an album with a scathing protest song called *Go Down Nixon*. It shot to #1 on the charts in the first week after its release. BMB became an instant icon of the growing social revolution and Vince Blaylock was a star.

Vince, with his long, flowing blonde hair and good looks was a full-fledged hippie, a bona-fide peacenik, always adorned with love beads around his neck and a peace symbol tattooed on his right shoulder. He was the quintessential flower child, a gentle soul of 23 years, with a heart of gold. And the girls... the girls

loved him. Ironically, he had no steady girl friend - at least not that the public at large was aware of. There was, however, one girl - one very special girl.

Vince had been seeing this girl for a few months and, in spite of his reluctance to fall into another relationship after the emotional breakup with his former girl friend a year ago, he believed he was helplessly falling in love. Her name was Randessa, or Randi for short. She wasn't drop-dead gorgeous model material like his former lover, the blazing hot redhead, Michelle or, for that matter, Brenda, the blonde bombshell in his life before Michelle. But he found those types to be too high maintenance and completely wrapped up in their own egocentric worlds. Randi was quite different. Her beauty was simple, natural, and unaffected and she was one of the most caring persons he'd ever met. But she was a Peace Corps volunteer and had recently left home for a one-year assignment in the Philippines. So, although he did have someone in his life, he'd managed to keep the relationship a secret and the public perception of his apparent availability only made him all the more attractive to the hordes of female groupies who followed him everywhere. Sometimes that was great. He did love his fans. Other times it was a pain in the neck. This particular night it was exactly that - a pain in the neck - and quite literally so.

Vince and his band were playing the final chorus of their unique folk-rock version of *Auld Lang Syne*, the confetti now covered the dance floor and the kissing was mostly over. Not that the kissing bothered Vince. Not then. Not in those days. It was a sign of love, after all, and he was fast becoming a poster child for the 'Love Generation'. Just because he didn't have anyone special with whom to share a New Year's kiss that night didn't mean he had anything against those who did - which, as far as he could tell, seemed to be everyone but him. Still, kissing was a good thing and watching the couples engaging in the ritual out on the dance floor made him smile. It also made him reluctantly aware of the loneliness that he was trying so hard to suppress. There was no way around it. He missed Randi like crazy.

At last the final chord of the song hung in the air and faded into the din of laughter and a few drunken blasts of party horns as the couples slowly deserted the dance floor and found their way back to their tables. Vince glanced at his watch. 12:05. It was time for the band to take a break.

Vince didn't feel like mixing with the crowd and he really didn't want to be bugged by any of his exuberant female fans. It had been a long night, thoughts of Randessa were crowding into his mind, and there was still the better part of an hour to go as they were scheduled to play until 1 a.m. So he put his guitar on the stand behind him and quickly disappeared backstage where he made a side exit to the alley out back for a smoke.

The cool night air felt good as he took a drag off his cigarette and exhaled the smoke upward toward the stars. He leaned back against the old brick wall and closed his eyes. "Randessa," he whispered as he pictured her standing in the doorway of his bedroom, wearing the hot pink lace negligee she'd surprised him

with the first night they made love. He would like the memory to have lasted longer but his private moment was interrupted by an unfamiliar voice.

“Hi Vince. Got the time?”

Vince’s eyes snapped open. The unfamiliar voice belonged to an equally unfamiliar, dark-haired woman, tall, shapely, in her early 20s. She was stylishly dressed in a black, one-piece, bell-bottom jumpsuit with a silver chain belt that rested loosely on her hips. The satin smooth flesh of her full breasts rose alluringly from a dangerously plunging neckline. A pair of sparkling red ruby earrings dangled from either side of a gorgeous face that was framed perfectly by a straight fall of long black hair. The color of the earrings was matched by a pair of shiny, red, patent leather stiletto heels that adorned her perfect feet. She was as stunning as he was stunned.

“What?” he asked. His own voice sounded far away.

She tapped her wrist and grinned. “The time?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” He looked at his watch. “Twelve-fifteen, exactly.”

“Thanks. Got a light?”

“What?”

She brought a cigarette up to her mouth and gently rolled it across her lower lip. “A light,” she said again. She seemed to breathe the words more than speak them.

“Um, yeah, sure,” he stammered, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out his lighter, flipped it open but it wouldn’t work. He tried it again. Nothing. He looked at it, baffled. It was a new lighter. It always worked.

She grinned. “Third time’s a charm,” she said, confidently. “Timing is everything, you know.”

“Yeah, so they say.” He gave the lighter another flick and it worked perfectly. He looked askance at her and then back to his lighter. He stood staring at the flame.

“Ahem,” the woman cleared her throat.

Vince looked up. “Ah, sorry.” He held the lighter up to her cigarette.

She cupped her hands gently over his as she tipped the cigarette to meet the flame and drew deeply. “Thanks,” she said, exhaling a shaft of smoke upward.

He shrugged. “No problem.”

A coy smile crossed her face and she looked at him as if she knew something that he didn’t.

He cocked his head. “What?” he said.

“Now I have something for you.”

He was mesmerized by the woman's deep brown eyes and felt strangely attracted to her but in the back of his mind he didn't want any of this to be happening. "You have something for me?"

"Oh, yes," she said. The tone of her voice seemed to imply that whatever she had for him was something he most assuredly would enjoy.

"What is it?"

She dropped her cigarette to the ground and crushed it with a slow, deliberate twisting motion under the toe of one of her red stilettos. Then she gently lifted his own cigarette from his fingers, dropped it to the ground and extinguished it in like manner.

"Um..." he started to object.

"Shhh..." she whispered, raising a finger to her lips.

In one, slow, subtle motion she advanced toward him, her breasts pressing against his chest, her eyes focused on his, her hands caressing his chiseled face, her mouth slightly open, her breath warm against his lips.

The spell was cast. He couldn't resist. He was helplessly caught in the psychic web of her strange and powerful attraction. In his mind he was pleading for her to stop but the words were stifled, extinguished like the cigarettes crushed under her perfect feet.

She pressed her lips gently against his and he felt her moist, warm tongue enter where his own cries of protest had no hope of escape. It was a kiss of the most sensual lust, beyond anything he'd ever known. His body burned with the heat of a fever. His eyes rolled back in his head. His eyelids fluttered. He felt faint. His legs grew weak and could barely sustain his own weight. He started to collapse but she pressed her body against him, pinning him to the wall and moved in for the real kiss – the kiss of death that would, at the same moment, be the kiss of eternal life, eternal torment mixed with pleasure, and – most of all - eternal hunger.

The woman's own body was on fire and her blood sizzled with anticipation as her mouth grazed across Vince's cheek. She lingered, momentarily at his left ear, breathing her hot breath into it and exploring its curves with her tongue. Then down the side of his face she moved, slowly, slowly, toward his neck. She loosened the collar of his shirt, exposing his vulnerable flesh. The passion now boiled inside her with an intensity she could barely contain. She ripped his shirt wide and with a final surge of energy she sank the fangs of lust into the young man's throat and drank deeply of the crimson flow. Her body quaked and shuddered with an orgasmic rush. A moment later, satiated with pleasure, she threw her head back and squealed with delight as she backed away and let Vince's body slump to the ground, discarded like the empty wrapper of a fast-food meal. And then, for her, it was over. But for Vince it was only the beginning.

1

One Minute to Midnight, New Year's Eve, 2068 The Blue Moon Restaurant & Lounge

The confetti floated down from somewhere near the ceiling like multicolored snow falling from a black sky. The horns and noisemakers whistled and shrieked. The new year, 2069, was just one minute away, and the kissing began. The damned kissing. That's what the devilishly handsome, young man, Vince Blaylock, hated most was the kissing. He sat alone at a small table in a dark corner of the lounge watching the kissing crowd and he cringed as the band began playing that insipid New Year's classic, *Auld Lang Syne*. Roughly translated the title of the ageless old Scottish song meant something like *times gone by*. A musician himself, Vince had played it many times at New Year's Eve celebrations when he was the lead singer with a now defunct goth-rock band called *Teeth*. The band fell apart in 2067 when the bass player and the drummer were busted for possession of Third Eye, the latest in a batch of new synthetic hallucinogens that were making the rounds on the streets. Those were the days. *Auld Lang Syne*. Times gone by. The whole scene here, now, was a fitting bit of synchronicity, really, as *times gone by* was the reason he hated the song – but most of all, the kissing. The damned kissing. It reminded him of that other New Year's party back in 1969, exactly 100 years ago this night. That woman. That body. Those red stiletto heels. *That bitch!*

Now, with a very old and well-honed bitterness rising within him, Vince lit a cigarette and glared at the banner hanging above the stage:

HAPPY NEW YEAR – 2069!

A hundred years, he thought to himself. A hundred goddam blood-sucking years. And how many more to go? Another hundred? A thousand? He shook his head. If I could only go back, knowing what I know now. I'd shove a stake into the heart of that vampire bitch so hard it'd make her fucking fangs pop out of her fucking head.

“Last call!” the cocktail waitress announced as she passed by Vince's table.

He glanced at his watch. It was fifteen minutes to two. *Hmm...* he snorted to himself. *Time flies when you're having fun.* He waived the waitress off, reluctantly left a tip on the table and headed for the door.

When he reached the parking lot outside he walked toward his car but stopped dead in his tracks. He couldn't believe what someone had done. The front and back tires on the driver's side of his car had been slashed. They were flat as pancakes. The sight sent him into a rage. He clenched his fists. "Damn! Fuck! Shit!" It was the last thing he needed. The perfect ending to a perfectly crappy night. "Damn!" he cursed again, kicking the deflated front tire. He had one spare in the trunk but that would only solve half the problem. "Why me?" he moaned. "Why now?"

2

Vince pulled out his cell phone to call a cab but he couldn't get a signal. "Un-freaking-believable!" Of course there was another way to get home. He could transform himself into a bat and fly the distance. That would certainly be the vampire thing to do. But he hated transformations. It seemed to drain him of precious energy which then necessitated the hassle of going out and stalking some poor victim for a good long drink of the salty red stuff. It was all just too much trouble, not to mention the fact that he hated bats anyway.

Exasperated, he turned and sauntered back to the lounge to use their phone but he was too late. The club was closed for the night. He kicked the door, cursed a couple times and then, dejectedly, turned and sat down on the pavement. He pulled the collar of his jacket up around his neck. Not that he could really feel the cold. It was just an affectation, a little bit of self-delusion. He did things like that sometimes, pretending for fleeting moments that he wasn't really... a monster.

As he sat alone contemplating his situation a heavy fog rolled in. The mist engulfed the entire area in an eerie, iridescent blue glow from the diffused light of the Blue Moon's large neon sign somewhere out near the street.

He lit a cigarette and leaned back against the restaurant door. *Hell of a night,* he mused sarcastically. *I should have stayed home and watched holovision.* Holovision had replaced television at least 10 years ago but they were expensive and he couldn't afford one until recently. Now he was hooked on it. It was cool. The thing projected a free-standing, 3-D holographic image onto a table top and you could walk completely around it and see it from any angle. Gaming with a holovision was unbelievable. Ironically, his favorite holovision game was about slaying vampires and it was based on a nearly ancient television program. *Yeah, that's what I could have been doing tonight. I could have been battling with Buffy instead of sitting here like an idiot. Crap.* Then he heard the rolling, crunching sound of car tires on gravel. It was coming from somewhere around the side of the

building. He cranked his head to see if by some odd chance it might just happen to be a taxi cruising for a fare. He squinted his eyes as the bright beams of the vehicle's headlights slowly pivoted around the corner of the building. The car now crept along the front of the restaurant and stopped where he was sitting.

"Jesus," he muttered to himself. "That ain't no taxi."

The long, shiny, black limousine with darkly tinted windows was nothing like Vince had ever seen – except maybe in a magazine of antique automobiles. It was a classic 1959 Cadillac, complete with the devilishly sharp and very large tail fins and the 300-pound, polished chrome grill with the huge, chrome, bullet-shaped bumpers – all the features that made this model the favorite among those who savored such notorious extravagance back in the day. *But what the fuck is it doing here?*

The question had barely crossed his mind when the limo door opened and the driver stepped out. He was tall, middle-aged, with a neatly trimmed black mustache. Smartly attired in a black chauffeur's outfit – complete with the flat, short-billed cap and black leather driving gloves – all completely in accordance with the automobile's historical period – the man could not have been more out of place. He opened one of two back passenger doors on the driver's side and gestured with his hand toward the car's interior, clearly beckoning Vince to enter.

"Good evening, Mr. Blaylock," the driver said, politely tipping the brim of his cap. "I believe you could use a ride." His manner was matter-of-fact, as if there was nothing at all unusual about the situation.

Vince stood up, his eyes narrowed with an inquisitive look. "How did you know my name? Who the hell are you?"

The driver shrugged. "I was a big fan of BMB."

"BMB?" Vince scoffed. "My band? No way. That was a hundred –" He stopped mid-sentence. *The guy must be one of us*, he thought to himself.

The driver smiled and shook his head. "No, I'm not a vampire."

Vince was taken by surprise. "What? How did you know what I was?"

The driver nodded toward the opened door of the car. "Time's a-wasting, my friend. You need a ride and here I am. Shall we go?"

Vince decided he had nothing to fear from the guy. *After all*, he thought, *I'm a freakin' vampire and he's not. What the hell could he possibly do to me?* "All right. I'm game. Let's go."

Vince climbed into the back of the limo. The driver closed Vince's door, got back into the driver's seat and pushed a button on the antiquated 8-track cartridge tape player that was mounted under the dashboard. Immediately, the stereo speakers in the back of the car began to flood the compartment with the music of Blind Man's Bluff. Vince was pleasantly surprised but had no idea that powerfully hypnotic phrases had been subliminally mixed into the tape. His initial reaction of pleasant surprise quickly gave way to an odd sort of dizziness. He felt light-headed, confused. A moment later he was unconscious and dreaming

about Randessa. She was standing at the end of a long, dark hallway beckoning for him to come to her. Suddenly he awoke with a start. “Wha-?”

The driver was standing outside the car, holding the door open. “Here we are,” he informed Vince. “You can get out now.”

Vince was groggy and more confused than ever. He stepped out of the car and looked around. It was still the middle of the night but nothing looked familiar. He stuttered. “Wh – where are we?”

The driver, now back behind the wheel of the limo, switched on the ignition and rolled the window down just a crack. He handed Vince what appeared to be a business card. Vince took the card and looked at it. In the center of the card were the words, SECOND CHANCE LIMOUSINE SERVICE. The numbers 1 through 12 were printed along the top edge of the card. The numbers 13 through 24 continued along the bottom of the card. The number 2 on the top row of numbers had a hole punched through it. He’d never seen anything like it. He leaned in toward the driver’s window. “What the hell is this supposed to be?”

The driver gave a couple quick tugs to the bottom of his gloves to ensure a snug fit and casually lowered the gearshift into the drive position. “Take a look around,” he said. “It’ll come to you. Now go do what you have to do. And don’t forget,” he added, pointing to the punched number. “You’ve only got 2 hours to get it done. If it’s not done by then you’ll be right back where we met, at the front door of the Blue Moon. If that happens, well...” he left Vince hanging.

Vince’s patience was wearing thin. He slapped the top of the limo and backed away. “Well what?” he demanded.

“If that happens,” the driver said, “you’ll know you blew your chance.” Then he smiled slightly and, tipping the brim of his hat, he added with a nod, “Good luck, Vince.”

“My chance? What-?”

The limo driver tapped a button on the console, the window closed and the long, black automobile drove away into the night, leaving Vince to figure it out for himself.

3

Stunned and completely baffled, Vince shook his head as if that would clear the cobwebs and make the whole episode vanish like a bad dream. It didn’t work, of course, but there was something. Something he could feel. Or couldn’t feel would be more accurate. Something was missing. He thought for a moment, trying to understand. It took several minutes to figure it out and when he did he was amazed but it left him even more confused. What was missing was that repulsive, persistent desire for blood. It was always there. Always! It lived inside

him, crouching in the shadows of his being like a hideous, deformed creature waiting to be fed. Now it was gone. The more he thought about it the more he realized the heavy weight of that monster had been lifted from him. Something had released it from the depths of his soul and he felt liberated. But how? It didn't make sense. He looked at the business card again, puzzling over it for a moment, then stuffed it into his pocket and shook his head. He glanced at his watch. "What?" he gasped. It was 10:30. *Wait a minute! Can't be! It was after two in the morning just a few minutes ago! What the hell?*

"Hey, Vince!" a young man's voice called out from across the street. "There you are! Come on!"

Vince froze. The voice seemed vaguely familiar. As he spun around to see who it was he noticed the once empty street was now busy with traffic. The fellow calling his name from across the street was waving his arms, beckoning Vince to hurry over. Vince squinted against the glare of the streetlights. The figure waving to him was as familiar as the voice. He looked again. *Son of a bitch!* "Mick?" he whispered to himself. "What the—?"

The figure across the street was Mick Trevor, the drummer from the band, Blind Man's Bluff. Bewildered as Vince was by the sight of his old band mate, he nearly dropped to his knees when he noticed the building in front of which Mick was standing. It was the old Backstreet Ballroom! Suddenly, in a flash, he understood. It was impossible but it had happened. Somehow he'd been transported back through time. It was crazy. *Back in time. Auld Lang Syne. Times gone by.* As those thoughts rolled through his mind they conjured up a chilling memory of some words from a hundred years ago – *no*, he corrected himself, *not a hundred years ago. Two hours from now* – words spoken to him by an exotic beauty asking for a light: 'Timing is everything', she would jokingly quip just moments before sinking her bone-white fangs into his throbbing, defenseless neck. The mere memory sent a jolt of sheer terror quaking through his body. Then it hit him. *The card!* He reached into his pocket and pulled out the business card and read the words. "Second Chance Limousine Service." He grinned and ran his finger over the hole where the number 2 had been punched. *Two hours! I've got two hours to kill that vampire bitch and get my life back!*

"Vince!" Mick shouted. "What the hell are you doing? We're on in five minutes!"

4

Vince and Mick hurried into the building and headed for the stage.

Mick had to ask. "What the hell were you doing across the street?"

Vince shrugged. "Having a toke. That's all."

Mick grinned and nodded knowingly as they walked onto the stage. “Groovy,” he said. “Let’s rock the house.”

The rhythm guitar player, Jerry, and the bass player, Rob, were already set up and waiting. Josh stopped fiddling with the volume on his Hammond B-3 keyboard and looked up. They all flashed questioning glances at Vince and Mick. Mick put his hand up to his mouth and pantomimed the smoking of a joint. Jerry and Rob grinned. Josh plunked out a couple bars of the theme from *Twilight Zone* on his keyboard.

“We’ve had a couple requests for something from the Doors,” Mick told Vince. “Whaddya think?”

Vince shrugged. “Light My Fire?” He looked for a reaction from the others.

Jerry nodded. “I can dig it,”

Rob tied his long hair back into a ponytail. “Psychedelic!” he said. “I’m in.”

Josh’s grin was ear to ear. Of course he was up for it. It gave him a chance to show his stuff with the long, haunting keyboard solo in the middle of the song. “Let’s give them the extended version!” he beamed. “I mean like really get into a groove. Dig?”

It was unanimous. Everyone was ready to get into the zone. It was a great way to work up to the midnight hour when they’d have to tone it back and play the dreaded *Auld Lang Syne*.

As they launched into the song Vince had more on his mind than just trying to recall the lyrics. He had slightly more than an hour now to accomplish the most important task of his life. The lyrics flowed effortlessly from the depths of his subconscious as another part of his mind was racing with the pace of the music trying to figure out how the hell he was going to pull it all off. He didn’t have to wait long for an answer. It was provided for him, quite unexpectedly, in the middle of Josh’s extended keyboard solo.

Mick was drumming his brains out during Josh’s solo when the drumstick in his right hand hit the rim of the snare drum and the tip of the stick snapped off. Undaunted, and without missing a beat, he tossed the broken stick into the air and reached for the spare on the amp next to him. The broken stick tumbled across the stage and landed at Vince’s feet. Vince reached down, picked it up and looked at it like it had been dropped from Heaven. In an instant everything fell into place.

The moment the song was over Vince shoved the broken stick into his back pocket and glanced at his watch. It was 11:25. He threw off his guitar and turned to his friends. “You guys will have to carry on without me,” he said, almost breathless from the thought of what he was about to do. “I gotta go!”

Without even the briefest explanation he took off backstage and disappeared, leaving the others surprised and clueless.

Mick’s eyebrows shot up. “Man,” he said, “Must have been some good shit he was smokin’.”

5

Vince ran down the back alley and emerged onto the street. “Yes!” he blurted as the thing he was hoping to see came into view. Just as he had remembered, Paretti’s Taste of Italy restaurant was on the corner. Vince had worked part time for the owner, Anthony Paretti, before the band exploded onto the scene. Vince had been one of Paretti’s best employees and the two of them had remained on good terms after Vince quit to become a full time rock star. Now Vince burst into the front entrance of the restaurant, hurried past the tables and made his way straight to the kitchen.

Paretti looked up from the meal he was preparing. “Vince!” he said, clearly shocked to see the young man. “What are you doing? What’s wrong?”

Out of breath from running, Vince panted. “No time to explain. Need you to do me a favor.”

Paretti put down his knife and gave a puzzled look. “I don’t understand. What is it?”

“Garlic!”

Befuddled by the strange request, Paretti repeated the word. “Garlic?”

“Yes! I need garlic! Can you give me a dozen cloves of garlic? Please?”

“Well, I...”

“Please!” Vince pleaded. “I’ll pay you later! Just give me the goddam garlic! Now!”

Realizing the young man was desperate – although God only knew why – Paretti told him to wait a moment. He disappeared around a corner and returned with a dozen cloves of garlic in a small, brown paper bag. “Pretty weird, Vince. What the hell is going on? You out hunting vampires or something?”

The comment stopped Vince cold. “How did–?” Then he shook his head. “Never mind.” He snatched the sack from Paretti’s hand and raced toward the kitchen exit. He stopped briefly and turned to Paretti. “Thanks, man,” he said before vanishing out the door. “I owe you.”

Now, back in the shadows of the alley, Vince removed his shoelaces and quickly fashioned a necklace of garlic cloves. He tied the two ends together, draped the garland around his neck and hid it beneath his shirt.

Then he ran back out to the street and headed down another block to the gas station on the opposite corner. There he purchased a red, plastic gas can. He filled it with a gallon of high-octane and paused to gather his thoughts. He looked at his

watch. It was midnight, straight up. *Happy new year!* If everything was going the way he imagined then she would show up in the alley behind the Backstreet Ballroom at 12:15, just like before. But this time he would be ready. *Come on baby, light my fire!*

6

Behind the Backstreet Ballroom, Vince leaned squarely against the old brick wall, took a drag off his cigarette, blew the smoke up into the cold night sky and waited. He checked the time. 12:10. This was all so eerily familiar. His heart pounded. The anticipation was nerve-wracking. He was breathing rapidly. *Calm down*, he told himself. Just as before, he closed his eyes and his mind wandered off to thoughts of his sweet Randessa. God, how he missed her. Now, at last he'd have a chance to be with her when she returned from her assignment in the Philippines. Only a few more months and they would be rejoined and live happily ever after. He chuckled at the thought of a white picket fence, a dog, two-point-five kids and a house in the suburbs. *Some hippie, I am.*

"Hi, Vince. Got the time?"

This time the sultry voice was not unfamiliar at all. It had repeated itself a million times in his head over the years. He was ready. Slowly, he opened his eyes. There she was, gorgeous, stunningly beautiful, just as he had remembered, from her long, silky black hair to the shiny, red stilettos adorning her perfect feet. He didn't have to look at his watch.

"Yeah," he said. "It's twelve-fifteen. Exactly."

He was puzzled that she was standing so close to him yet she seemed not at all affected by the garlic. He couldn't understand it. Garlic had always sickened him, drained him of energy when he was... one of them. *Shit! What's going on?*

"Thanks," she said. "Got a light?"

Oh, yeah, he grinned to himself. *I've got a light, all right.* "What?" he asked, hoping to buy some more time for the garlic to take affect.

She brought a cigarette up to her mouth and gently rolled it across her lower lip. It was a perfect repeat performance. "A light," she said again in the same breathy voice that he remembered so well.

He tried to read her face, her eyes, looking for some sign of weakening. It did seem as if something was happening. Maybe the garlic was working, ever so slightly but perhaps just enough.

"Um, yeah, sure," he stammered, reaching into his pocket. He fumbled around in the wrong pocket to buy another few precious moments. Then he switched to the other pocket and pulled out his lighter. He flipped it open but it wouldn't

work. He tried it again. Still nothing. He looked at it, as if he was baffled by the situation but, of course, he wasn't.

She grinned but her eyelids seemed to twitch ever so slightly. "Third time's a charm," she said. The eyes fluttered again. Her voice was weakening. "Timing is... everything... you know."

"Oh, that is so true," he replied. Then with one, powerful move, he pushed himself from the wall, lunging at her with the full weight of his body. Taken by surprise, she stumbled backward, falling to the ground.

He stood, looking down at her, this pitiful, gorgeous thing at his feet, moaning, writhing, snakelike in the dirt. He felt sorry for her, really. But not sorry enough. Before she could regain control, he pounced on her and grabbed a brick he had ready and waiting at his feet. Sitting on her stomach, pinning her down, he struggled to keep her from escaping. She struggled back with what strength she had left and he bashed her once in the side of the head with the brick. He flinched as her blood splattered against his face. Out of sheer habit from a hundred years of bloodlust, he licked it from his lips but spit it out, repulsed by the taste. The blow to her head stopped her from moving but he knew it would be temporary.

Quickly, he reached around and pulled the splintered drumstick from his back pocket and held it firmly against her chest. He raised the brick to strike the blow but paused as he realized what he was about to do to this beautiful creature. The peacenik – the poster child for the Love Generation – was about to commit a horrendous act of murder. He shuddered and battled with his conscience. He was having a second thought about this second chance. It gnawed at him from the inside. *How can I do this?* He nearly let go of the brick when, suddenly, the creature's eyes snapped open, her mouth gaping wide, her fangs gleaming white in the moonlight. She growled and hissed at him like some nightmarish cross between a freak feral cat and a rattle snake. He jerked back and struck the blow, pounding the stake into her flesh, straight through the heart.

Repulsed – even shocked – by his own act, he struggled to stand. His hands were shaking. His knees weak. He was exhausted. It was over.

He stumbled back a few steps and looked at what he'd done. Then he remembered. *No*, he reminded himself. *It's not over yet*. There was one more step, one final act that must be done to rid the world of this creature forever. He looked at his watch. 12:22. He had eight minutes.

He bent down and grabbed the creature by the feet and dragged it over to the large metal dumpster. The body was heavy and he struggled to lift it. With a huge effort he finally managed to get the torso draped, head first, over the rim. He paused to catch a breath and then, with a single, awkward shove, he pushed it over the rim and it fell with a thud into the great metal coffin. He grabbed the gas can, doused the body with gasoline and pulled out his lighter. He flicked it once. Nothing. A second time. Nothing. *What was it she said? Third time's a charm?* And so it was. He adjusted the flame to full height, shielded his eyes and dropped it into the coffin. The gas ignited with a powerful *whomp!* nearly blowing him

backward against the wall of the old building. The alley lit up from the light of the fire.

He looked up and down the alley to see if anyone was watching but he was alone. Then a drop of blood trickled down his cheek and rolled onto his lips. He wiped it with his hand and realized his hands and jacket were also splattered with the tell-tale blood. He whipped off his jacket, turned it inside out and wiped the blood from his hands and face on the inner lining and then tossed it into the blazing inferno. He wanted to close the lid but was afraid it might extinguish the fire. *Wait! The brick!* He grabbed it and used it as a wedge between the lid and the top edge of the dumpster to prevent it from closing completely. That done, and with the funeral pyre roaring like a furnace inside the dumpster, Vince walked away.

As he neared the end of the alley he turned back to look at the scene of the battle. He checked his watch. 12:30. *Buffy would be proud*, he thought to himself. Then he remembered. It was 1968. There was no Buffy yet. *No, wait*, he reminded himself. *1968 is dead and gone. It's a new year!* He gazed down the dark alley to see the dying light of the fire glowing from under the lid of the dumpster. Emotionally drained, he appeared solemn. "Auld Lang Syne, whoever you were," he whispered. Then he added, with a grin, "And good riddance."

Epilogue

Before Vince entered back out onto the street to face whatever his new life – his new, old life – would bring, he stopped and took a deep breath. Then he heard a young female voice coming from somewhere down the alley.

"Vince? Vince? Is that you?"

Vince froze. *Randessa?* He spun around.

The figure of a young woman was walking briskly up the alley toward him.

"Vince! That *is* you! I've been looking all over for you!"

He couldn't believe his eyes. "Randessa! What are you doing here? I thought you were still in the Philippines!"

"Surprise!" she said, giggling as she rushed to meet him.

Vince started toward her. "Surprise? That's an understatement! What's going on? Why are you here? Not that I'm not thrilled, but what-?"

In a moment they were face to face. She was all dressed up with a low-cut blouse under a fashionable, black leather coat. Her normal mousy brown hair was now a richer shade of brunette, streaked with blonde highlights and, much to his surprise, she was wearing lipstick and eye makeup. All of this was so unlike how he remembered her. He marveled at her appearance.

“You look so... so different!” he said.

She grinned, coyly. “You like?”

“Well, yeah! I mean you were always beautiful in my eyes. You know that. But yeah, you look great! What happened?”

She grabbed hold of his hands and looked up at him. “Oh,” she said, gazing into his eyes, “so much has happened. I’ll tell you all about it later. Right now I just want to hold you.”

They wrapped in a tight embrace and she squeezed him like she never wanted to let go of him again.

“God,” Vince whispered into her ear, “you don’t know how I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” she purred. Then she lightly kissed the lobe of his ear. Then the side of his face. Then lower, lower, until her lips came to rest at the soft part of his neck. “I love you, Vince,” she whispered. “And I promise we’re going to be together for a long, long time.”

A moment later the unmistakable, blood-curdling scream of a man locked in a nightmare of sheer terror, reverberated into the cold, dark night.

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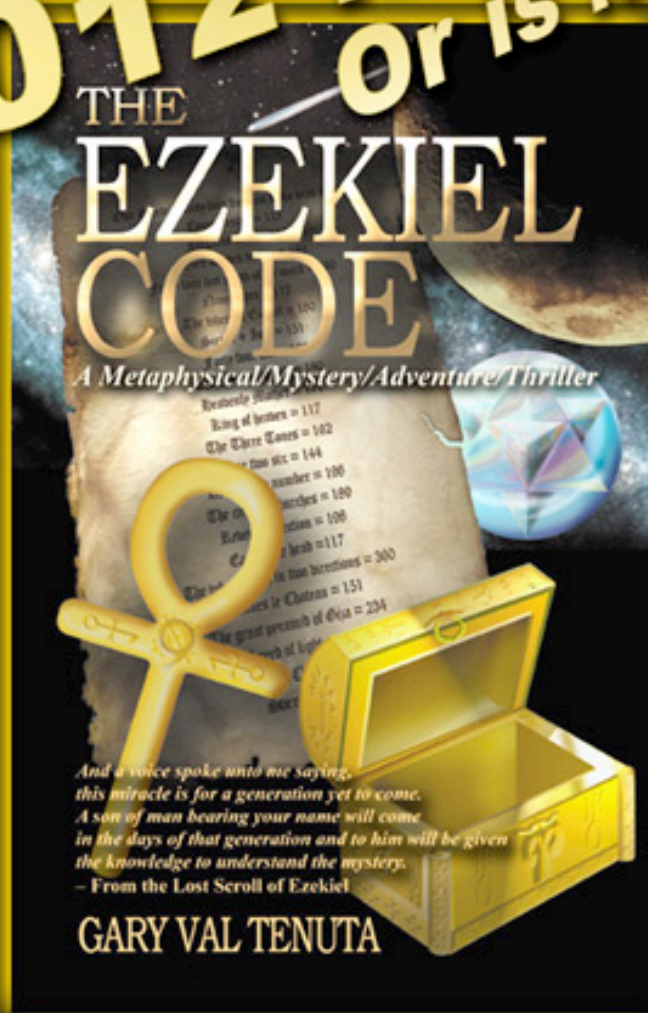
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