

“Clarissa”

By Darren Franz

I’m going to die tonight. It scares me, but not as much as I would have thought.

Maybe it’s because I’m in love.

Two weeks ago, I was standing on the second floor balcony, watching the lobby as usual. Although my job description clearly defines my duties as a roving security guard, my boss wouldn’t exactly give me praise for lingering on the second floor. Especially since Reliance Insurance doesn’t own space on two.

I didn’t give a shit. I was on a personal reconnaissance of sorts, and had been for about six months.

The day Clarissa started with the company.

If I didn’t see her when she came through the revolving doors every morning, then my day didn’t go right. The compulsion to see a woman who barely knew me is a little strange. I found myself going over that point every day, but it didn’t stop me from coming back.

I stood there, trying to look as though I actually belonged, my eyes following the assembly line of morning commuters passing by outside.

My hands clenched the railing. I glanced at the brass art deco clock mounted above the doors.

Clarissa arrived between 7:50 and 8:00 a.m.

Like a junkie waiting for his pusher, I started to pace once I’d ascertained she was late. By 8:15, I went through my daily ritual of questioning my motives for keeping such a foolish vigil.

Let me clarify something. Clarissa’s married. I’m not a stupid man; I knew what I was doing was not only unhealthy, it was bordering on obsession. I’ve heard all the excuses. I could have done a hundred other things with my time.

Yet I could’ve no more walked away that morning than I could have slit my own throat.

I’ve read the articles about stalkers. I didn’t think of my situation quite that way, but that’s what I was doing. I just didn’t have a clue why.

It was 8:28 when she entered the lobby.

Her hair was coifed in imitation of Hitchcock’s “cool blondes”. Grace Kelly. “Tippi” Hedren. You know the type.

My breath caught in my chest.

She moved at her usual brisk pace, passing directly under me before disappearing to the elevator bank.

The moment she was out of sight, I was on the run to the elevators on the second floor.

My finger hesitated before pushing the “up” button. An inner clock was trying to calculate the proper moment. I felt the sweat lining my palms as I finally pressed it. There was a musical sound: “ding!”

The doors rumbled open.

Clarissa glanced at me, and smiled.

“Good morning, Mark.”

We were alone. That had never happened before.

“Good morning, Clarissa,” I replied, dry swallowing past the golf ball lodged in my throat.

She unfastened the belt on her raincoat. She was wearing a black skirt, falling just above the knee. Ivory silk blouse. White stockings; black leather boots.

My mind was ticking off the details, storing them away for future use in my dreams. I caught the switch in her nail polish (from mother of pearl to mauve), and got a good whiff of her perfume: Ariane.

I was so immersed in Clarissa's appearance, that I didn't catch what she said.

"We're not moving."

"Huh?"

"I think the elevator's stuck or something."

I wanted to take her in my arms and kiss her. The urge was so great that I actually took a step towards her before catching myself.

I checked the elevator doors.

Her perfume was intoxicating.

I managed to get the elevator to move.

The car surged upward. I continually stole glances at her.

During one of these casual glimpses, I noticed the book.

She was carrying it in her tote bag; the title jutted forward in dripping scarlet letters: SIXTEENTH CENTURY VAMPIRE LORE.

I read it again. She caught me looking.

"What?" she asked, blushing a little. Her eyes were skittish, darting over the elevator's plush interior.

"Required reading for Reliance employees?" I joked, smiling.

"No, no," she said, blushing. "It's mine."

"You like that stuff?"

Clarissa nodded gravely. "Mmm. It's a little creepy, but interesting."

The elevator slowed to a stop. My stomach did a queasy roll. The smell of Clarissa's perfume made me dizzy.

The doors slid open.

"Well, have a good day," she said before stepping out onto her floor.

"You too, Clarissa."

I watched her go, then went up to the roof.

I needed some fresh air.

I knew it then.

I was going to make a move on Clarissa.

* * *

All morning I resisted the urge to go up to the 23rd floor. Raw impulse would take over if we wound up alone again. I didn't know how she would react to my advances.

I sat in my office sorting through my mail, not really seeing it at all. I was thinking about what I'd learned of Clarissa through bits and pieces of overhead conversation. Cubicle clusters and water cooler chit-chat were wonderful sources of information.

First and foremost, I knew Clarissa wasn't happily married. Whenever the subject of her husband came up, she always had something demeaning to say.

This was only part of the attraction. She also had this dark side. I didn't put that one together on the basis of "Sixteenth Century Vampire Lore", although it certainly lends credence to my point of view. I

picked up on it from countless hours spent watching her. I knew her favorite color was black. I knew what style of clothing she liked to wear; I've checked out her legs so often that I could almost intuit what color stockings she would be wearing on any given day. I had gone through her desk drawers and rummaged through her garbage. And once, I examined the contents of the gym bag she'd left behind, reveling in the musky scent left on her panties.

I had a preconceived mental picture of what the real Clarissa Chandler was all about.

Her dark side came out when she was alone; I could read it in her eyes. The girl didn't just have skeletons in her closet. She had a graveyard. There was something going on behind that cheerful facade. I intended to find out what it was.

What I didn't understand was why I was so gung-ho to find out in the first place.

Clarissa wasn't a knock-out. She would never win any beauty contests. I could come up with at least a dozen girls in the company who were prettier.

She wasn't the nicest woman around, either. I'd heard several of her co-workers grumble about how Clarissa had back stabbed them to get ahead, and then turned around an hour later and was sweet as pie.

The hell of it was, I didn't think they were wrong. My perceptions were the same.

So why did I lust after Clarissa?

Her dark side. That air of mystique surrounding her. It perplexed me.

She radiated a kind of morbid sadness, like she was slowly slipping out of control. Her bitchy attitude was a carefully constructed put-up job devised to keep people away.

I felt I could help her. Sometimes when she looked at me, I thought she wanted me to.

I had to see her.

I got out of the elevator, and headed down the hall towards Clarissa's department.

My mind was churning.

I passed her cubicle. Clarissa was pulling files from a gunmetal gray file cabinet while simultaneously talking on the phone.

Our eyes met; she raised her hand. I raised mine in return. My head began to ache.

An idea hit me. It was the kind of idea which reeks of impulse, something to seize upon before thinking it out. Thought would kill the nerve.

I decided to write Clarissa a note. Of course, signing my name was out of the question. The fact that I would be adding my own touch of mystique to her life only made the idea more appealing.

I knew I would have to be around when she read it. That way, I could gauge her reactions. If she crumpled up the note and tossed it, I would know how she felt. But if she liked it...

I needed a place on Clarissa's floor where I could leave her the note, and watch her unobserved as she read it.

Dropping it off on her desk was too risky. Too many people would notice. Being a security guard has its benefits, but I get all kinds of curious looks when I hang around a floor. People tend to get nervous and jittery, like they've committed a crime or something.

I was driving myself crazy, racking my brains for a place, when I remembered the guest offices.

They were six small computer stations set apart from the rest of the floor by an enormous file room. These offices were generally used to house guests of the company, or out of town field underwriters who needed a temporary desk and phone.

Most of the time, they remained vacant.

I moved quickly to the file room door and let myself in with a master key. My heels echoed along the tiled floor; I knew before I got there that all six offices were empty.

My mind had already committed to this irreversible course of action.

A coat closet on the opposite wall faced the second and third rooms respectively.

I knew it would work.

One problem remained. How was I going to get Clarissa back to the guest offices to read my note?

It didn't take long to figure out.

Choosing the second office (it afforded a better view from the closet), I sat at the desk and wrote Clarissa a note. It turned out to be more of a poem.

For Clarissa—

Do you know what you're doing to me?

I expect you do sometimes.

Rendered helpless, can't you see?

My kindred spirit inside the rhyme.

Won't say outright—my deepest plea,

There ends the words I have for thee.

Pretty lame, huh? Well, let me just say something in my defense. I'm no poet, that much is obvious. Yet when I sat down to write it, the whole thing came out in one heated chunk. I didn't have to cross out or rewrite once. It was vague and darkly mysterious. I was dying to see her face when she read it.

When it was done, I folded it and stuffed it into an envelope. I scribbled her name across the front after sealing it, and then I stared at it for a full minute. I was trying to get my courage up.

After a few deep breaths, I picked up the phone and dialed Clarissa's extension. I wasn't worried she'd recognize my voice; I have one of those telephone voices that never sound familiar. I did not speak to Clarissa on a regular basis, and never over the phone.

I was more worried about whether she would come or not. I was counting on her dark impulses to lead her back there.

The phone beeped shrilly three or four times. I thought I was going to get her voice mail, when she answered.

"This is Clarissa Chandler. May I help you?"

"I hope so," I began. The words tumbled out of my mouth like hot rocks. "There's a note for you in the second guest office on the left, behind the file room. It's in the top desk drawer, on the right."

She didn't say anything at first. For one horrifying moment I thought she hung up on me. In a voice which was intrigued but clearly cautious, she said, "Who is this?"

"I'm your secret admirer," I replied, and hung up softly.

I jumped out of the chair, feeling giddy. My palms were slimed with sweat, and my mouth felt as dry as a lint trap.

I couldn't believe I was going through with it.

My heart was pounding as I scrambled into the closet.

Pulling the door closed behind me, I cracked it open just enough to see the desk in the guest office.

Minutes crawled by. I shifted from one foot to the other. Trying to calm myself, I took deep breaths in an attempt to get my racing heart under control.

I had time to think she wouldn't come. There were moments when I wanted to get out, but fear of Clarissa catching me held me at bay.

She showed up five minutes later; I can't even convey to you how long those five minutes seemed to me. By then I was jumping at shadows; half claustrophobic and mad to get out.

I heard her heels tapping quickly through the file room. The anticipation was killing me.

She came into view. I wanted her so badly that my heart actually cramped in my chest.

She was carrying a pad on a clipboard and a pen. Clarissa knew how to play the game all right. It didn't even occur to me she would tell her boss and her peers a cover story in order to sneak back here.

I watched her skirt around the edge of the desk. She pulled open the drawer, and I noticed a bemused grin on her face. It could have been wishful thinking on my part, but I thought Clarissa was eager to find out who had left her a note.

I watched as she took out the envelope, studying the handwriting to see if it rang any bells. It didn't. She tore it open; my self control was barely kept in check. I wanted to walk into that office and take Clarissa into my arms.

She smiled, her eyes scanning the words on the page. My words.

I heard the first line. She started it by reading it aloud in that blurry mumble people use when reading something alone. When she was through, she gazed out the window.

"Oh, my God," she said, still smiling. I was pleased over her obvious flattery. The light color high on her cheekbones gave it away.

She read the poem again, and then stuffed it hastily back into the envelope.

Clarissa lingered a moment. She looked directly at the closet. I swore she was seeing me. Her face showed no signs of recognition, and the moment passed.

I waited until I could no longer hear the echo of her high heels in the file room, and then I burst out of the closet. I was glad to be out.

Things got kind of hectic at work for a few days, and I didn't see much of her. We were installing a brand new security system, and I was putting in extra long hours training on the new software which came with it.

Clarissa was always on my mind; I couldn't get the image of her face as she read my poem out of my head.

An entire week passed, and I didn't see her. I was like a junkie going through serious withdrawal. I had to do something.

It was time for another note.

I wrote it during a break in the security training, and put it in the same spot in the second office.

Dear Clarissa,

I see that you're not happy, and I know I'm not. Maybe together we could be.

If you're ready to meet your secret admirer, come by this office at 7:00 am—the day after you read this.

I'll be waiting...

I dialed her extension. One of Clarissa's colleagues answered.

"Marion Sanchelli...may I help you?"

Frowning, I dropped my voice several registers and said, "Is Clarissa Chandler there?"

“No, she’s been out sick the past three days. May I take a message for her?”

I hung up quietly.

Out sick. For three days.

That wasn’t like Clarissa. I wondered what it was she had which would keep her home for so long.

Unless of course, she wasn’t sick at all.

My training on the new system ended that afternoon, so the next morning I stationed myself on the second floor balcony.

When Clarissa came in, all my doubts about her not being sick went out the window. I hardly recognized her. She was too pale. Her skin was sallow, the color of old flour. She was wearing sunglasses and a light chiffon scarf, items I’d never seen her wear. The sunglasses were big and gaudy; it reminded me of something a battered housewife might wear to hide her bruises.

A wave of pity and sadness swept over me.

Something else about her was different. It was subtle compared to the blatant cosmetic changes. I almost missed it.

Clarissa was moving entirely too slow. A week ago, she moved purposefully, her head held high and sure. Now she looked exhausted.

I didn’t think she would be up to finding out who her secret admirer was anymore.

I made a point of stopping by Clarissa’s cubicle on my way to the guest offices. I figured I could comment on her appearance and hear what had happened straight from the horse’s mouth.

Clarissa wasn’t at her desk.

I heard somebody remark about Clarissa’s health. Another thought she belonged in the hospital.

I marched towards the back offices.

I was able to move pretty quietly across the vast file room; years of standing on my feet prompted me to buy rubber-soled shoes.

A tenseness filled the air.

Clarissa was in the second office. She was staring out the window at the steady drone of traffic below. Her arms were crossed over her breasts to ward off a chill, although it was hot and stuffy back there.

My note was lying open on the desk.

She suddenly whirled around with a start, catching me off guard. I thought I was busted, but she only smiled and said, “Oh. Hi, Mark.”

She had been crying.

“Hi,” I said. My stomach was a tight knotted ball. I wanted to confess everything. I wanted to point at that piece of paper on the desk and say, “So, what do you think?”

But I didn’t. Clarissa looked terrible. Whatever personal demons she was fighting, I didn’t think knowing I was the author of her two love letters would help.

Instead, I told her the truth. “You don’t look so hot.”

The light coming in from the window did nothing to improve Clarissa’s pallor. She lacked her usual attractive glow.

“I don’t feel so hot,” she replied.

Clarissa gathered up her things. She placed the note inside a folder she had brought along.

“I think I’m going to go home and lie down,” she added.

Her hand tentatively touched the chiffon scarf around her neck, then dropped to her side almost guiltily. Her eyes averted mine as she brushed past me.

“Take care of yourself, Clarissa.”

She didn't answer. She simply shuffled out of the office and across the file room, looking beaten and used up.

It was the last time I saw her alive.

I heard the news the following day, and wouldn't have believed it had I not seen how she'd looked. Clarissa was dead. A company-wide memo went out to employees, stating she had died of a sudden illness. I was in shock. Not satisfied, I dug a little deeper, asking some of her friends at work quite discreetly exactly what had happened.

It was Marion Sanchelli who filled me in. According to her, Clarissa died of hemolytic anemia. “Some sort of blood infection,” was how she put it.

I don't know why Marion confided in me like she did. I think it had to do with the fact that I'm the company cop. Gossip this juicy could never be kept bottled up. It had to breathe.

“She said she was having nightmares,” Marion began, and then she lowered her voice to a whisper, and continued. “Some of them were...you know, sexual.”

I nodded sympathetically in all the right places. Meanwhile, my heart was thudding heavily in my chest.

“She mentioned a secret admirer,” Marion went on, and I had to bite my lower lip. “Someone was writing to her. Clarissa wasn't sure who, but she was obsessed with finding out.”

“Mark, I don't really know, but...Clarissa wasn't herself the last few days. What if someone...”

She couldn't go on, but I saw where she was going. I felt like I was going to vomit at any moment. I had to excuse myself; I didn't want to hear anymore.

Sick with grief and missing Clarissa already, I walked through the park on my way home. The night air was balmy, and it cleared my head.

I was Clarissa's secret admirer, not some nut case from an insane asylum. She died of a blood disease. It was unusual in someone so young, but not impossible. My desire for her, coupled with Marion's suspicions, made me feel guilty about her death.

Yet I found, even in death, I wanted her more than ever.

I couldn't get up enough courage to go to her funeral. I wanted to, but I felt I would stand out somehow.

I paid my respects a week later. I was going to take the day off and drive out to the cemetery, but one of the other guards called in sick so I wound up working a double shift.

I can't remember much of what I did that day. My mind was still reeling. I found myself waiting on the second floor balcony, watching for her, even though I knew she would never walk through the lobby doors again. My heart ached.

I puttered around the office, drinking too much coffee, and not doing anything productive. I cried a little.

The second shift was over at 8 PM. In spite of the lateness of the hour, I was determined to see her. I stopped at a florist downtown and bought a dozen long-stemmed roses for her grave. It was funny. The first girl I ever bought flowers for was beneath six feet of freshly-tilled earth.

The drive went on forever. I fidgeted in my seat, unable to get comfortable. My fingers drummed against the steering wheel. I played the radio too loud.

It was a little after 10 PM when I reached the cemetery. The gates were locked, but that didn't stop me.

I couldn't have stopped even if I'd wanted to.

The moon was full and engorged. It danced amidst the clouds.

There was a sour taste in my mouth. Perhaps seeing her name etched in stone (like some final comment on the whole mess), would enable me to let Clarissa rest in peace.

I walked around the perimeter of the cemetery. A tall wrought iron fence with sharp decorative ornaments crowning each post discouraged trespassers.

When I spotted two of the iron bars bowed outward like an old cowboy's legs, a shudder went through me.

Tossing a quick glance over my shoulder, I slipped inside. The smell of the roses had become cloying.

I set out to find Clarissa's grave.

The ground was muddy from the previous day's rain. It sucked at my feet, threatening to swallow my sneakers.

How long I blundered through the rows of tombstones and willow trees I can't say. I remember sensing someone behind me. As a gull cried and took wing, I turned around.

I felt suddenly cold.

A massive spider web had been formed between the mesh of low-hanging willow branches. Beyond, in the milky shadows formed by the moon, a figure appeared.

Through the translucent intricacies of the gossamer curtain, I saw Clarissa. Her eyes were ablaze like the tips of burning embers. They were a dark, ruby red. Hungry. There was an unnerving sense of purpose to her languid approach. It was as though the hands of time had stopped to admire the generous curves of her body.

In death, Clarissa was radiant.

She seemed to float towards me; not once did I hear her heels squelch through the muddy earth.

Clarissa smiled. When her lips parted, I caught sight of her sharp incisors. The roses fell from my hands.

"Oh, my God..." I whispered.

I couldn't move. Every instinct screamed at me to run, but my eyes were glued to her luminous shape.

Her skin was the color of alabaster, as white as the dress she had been buried in. I noticed the hem of her dress was torn and splattered with mud. Her cheeks were smeared with mortician's rouge.

"Hello, Mark." Her voice sounded like a mohair brush over velvet ticking. I could feel the muscles in my groin stirring uncomfortably against my jeans.

She was closing the distance between us with uncanny speed.

"You were the one who wrote those letters," she began. I sensed her eagerness, and nearly collapsed in fright. "Didn't you?"

"Yes," I heard myself stammer. I was shivering.

Clarissa continued to close in, circling me like a hungry animal.

Her nipples were hardened ice chips beneath the silken folds of her dress. She must have been in the throes of passion at the time of her death.

I felt the bulge of my straining erection.

"You still want me, don't you, Mark?" she teased. Her eyes impaled me as she unbuttoned her dress at the collar, working her way down. Her fingers were raw. The nails had been torn off from clawing her way out of the grave.

The image turned my stomach. I would have retched if her eyes hadn't held me enraptured.

“Don’t you?” she pouted.

“S-stop it,” I managed, but the tremble in my voice gave her cause to titter.

Her eyebrows were as thick as blackberry brambles. They raised in amusement.

“My master has given me the ultimate gift,” she said. Her lips curled slightly; her nostrils flared. I was aroused in spite of her snarl. “I went to him, and he took me. Now, you’ve come to me as well.”

“I d-don’t,” I began, but the words died on my lips as she placed one of her stiff fingers against my mouth.

“Sssshhhh...”

We kissed. Her gelid lips mashed against mine. I found myself both turned on and repulsed at the same time.

Her tongue squirmed inside my mouth.

Clarissa moaned, and knelt between my buckling legs.

The sound of the zipper on my jeans seemed as loud as machine gun fire as she raked it down.

She pushed me backward. As I lay sprawling on some unknown grave, amidst the cloying stench of dead flowers and burial decorations, Clarissa’s other hand found what it was looking for.

A hiss of air escaped from my lips. I arched my back, giving in to her cold caresses.

Tossing her hair back with hideous glibness, Clarissa smiled as she huddled over me.

“Tell me you love me, Mark. Say you’ll be mine...forever.”

My fingers trailed across the hollowed valley between her throat and her bare shoulders. I started thinking maybe it wouldn’t be so bad; I’d wanted Clarissa for so long.

“Say it,” she cooed. The drool on her chin was waxed in the moonlight.

“I...want...” I began, but abruptly stopped as my fingers brushed over the crusted scabs of the puncture wounds on her throat. My mind flooded with hideous clarity.

Clarissa had inched her way upward. Her eyes were hungrily affixed to the warm pulse at my neck.

“Say it, Mark,” she pleaded, as though she needed my consent. Her body quivered in savage anticipation.

My hand reached back over my head. I seized one of the floral decorations without looking. A cheap plastic crucifix surrounded by a garland of flowers. Its bottom was muddy; the pushpins which anchored it to the hallowed ground were long and sharp...

...Like Clarissa’s teeth.

I brought the crucifix between us, where it accidentally touched her forehead.

The skin at the point of contact immediately shriveled up. She drew back. There was a terrible searing sound, reminding me of steaks tossed on the backyard barbecue.

Shrieking in pain and anguish, Clarissa scrambled backward across the sodden ground on all fours like a giant crab. Her face had transformed into a gruesome leer, savage and yet somehow sorrowful.

I didn’t expect her to come at me again, but she did.

I stabbed downward with a thick grunt.

The pushpin end of the cross embedded in the dove-white flesh of her breast.

The cross glowed with a luminosity all its own.

Her skin at the point of contact withered, turning a mottled blue. I clapped my hands to my ears as her horrible cries pierced the night.

“Get you!” Clarissa managed, her heels digging up clods of mud.

With great effort, Clarissa wrapped her long fingers around the pin, and yanked it out. It left a bloodless dimple in her flesh.

The crucifix's glow began to sputter and die out.

Clarissa's eyes found mine.

She smiled hideously. "Tomorrow night, Mark. You're mine..."

I reached out and seized the crucifix in both trembling hands.

Clarissa shrieked. She scuttled beyond the rows of headstones. They poked through the ground like the teeth of some dormant leviathan.

I heard a strange laugh, followed by the heavy flap of leathery wings.

Clarissa was gone.

I burst into tears.

That was last night.

As I write this, I'm sitting in the second guest office beyond the file room. It seemed an apropos place. The late afternoon traffic is really humming; everyone wants to get home before it gets dark.

I can relate to that.

I was going to wear a silver cross around my neck, but I didn't. I'm unarmed.

If Clarissa comes for me tonight (and there's no reason to doubt what she said), I won't be able to fend her off again.

I was always attracted to Clarissa's dark side.