

Kiera Hudson

(Complete Series One)

Vampire Shift (Book 1)

Vampire Wake (Book 2)

Vampire Hunt (Book 3)

Vampire Breed (Book 4)

Wolf House (Book 5)

Vampire Hollows (Book 6)

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Story Editor

Lynda O'Rourke

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Carles Barrios

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Copyedited by:

Carolyn M. Pinard

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Written by Tim O'Rourke & C.J. Pinard

You can contact Tim O'Rourke at

<u>www.facebook.com/timorourkeauthor/</u> or by email at <u>kierahudson91@aol.com</u>

Vampire Shift

(Kiera Hudson Series One) Book One

By

Tim O'Rourke

For Lynda who kept on at me to write this...

Chapter One

My name is Kiera Hudson. I'm twenty-years-old and employed by Havenshire Police as a police constable in the southwest of England. I have been a police officer for eighteen months. On completion of my initial training, I was posted to the coastal town of The Ragged Cove. I'd heard rumours that the post was a difficult one to fill. Although this posting wasn't forced upon me by my superiors, they did make me an attractive offer I found difficult to refuse. The terms of my posting to the town, The Ragged Cove, included free accommodation and an unsociable shift allowance of £5,000, paid in a lump sum annually.

When I told my fellow recruits I had accepted the offer, some of them laughed nervously, stating that the force paid the shift allowance annually as no one had lasted long enough in the post to collect it. My shift pattern was a constant series of nightshifts that started every night at 1900 hours and finished at 0700 hours the following morning. Looking back now, I can understand the raised eyebrows of my friends, but at the time, I didn't want to refuse the post. I thought if I did, I would be viewed as inflexible by my superiors and I had ambitions way past the rank of constable. Like me, most of the other recruits were young, and knowing The Ragged Cove was pretty

remote and miles from the nearest railway station or motorway, I suspected they were more concerned about their social lives than their future careers.

So, packing a suitcase, which consisted mainly of my smart new uniform, I set off in my tired, old Mini and headed from my rented room in Havensfield to the desolate town of The Ragged Cove. I remember that day clearly as I made my way by a series of deserted country lanes towards the town. A few miles out, the sky clouded over and it started to rain. The day almost seemed to turn to night, as the rain lashed against the windscreen of my car and the wipers had trouble keeping the screen clear. With my headlights on full beam, I cautiously navigated my way towards the town. Several times I had to pull over off the narrow roads and park up by the entrance to some field and check the map I'd been given by Sergeant Phillips at training school.

I knew the town was remote, but it was only as I tried to reach it that I realised how isolated from the outside world it really was. It seemed to me that The Ragged Cove didn't want to be found. Realising I was just spooking myself, I shook off any regrets I might have been having, and carried on through the rain and gloom.

In an attempt to lighten my spirits, I turned on the car radio, hoping to find something I could sing along to. I settled for *On The Floor* by Jennifer Lopez. The roads seemed to get narrower as I headed down towards the cove, which spread out below me like a giant horseshoe. Wiping the mist from the windscreen with the back of my hand, I could see the sea in the distance and it looked black and angry as it crashed against the cliffs. As I

neared the town, the radio began to hiss and spit with static until I lost the signal completely. I made the rest of my journey in silence.

I reached the town just before five, but the sky was so dark that it seemed much later. Driving my car through the cobbled streets, I peered up at the tired-looking buildings that lined each side of the road. There was a row of shops which had been shut for the day, and the streets were so deserted, I wondered how they managed to stay in business. Sergeant Phillips said that a room had been rented for me above an Inn named "The Crescent Moon", but I couldn't seem to find it. Over and over again, I drove up and down the same streets, the wind and the rain hammering my little car. Then, just ahead, I saw a lone figure shuffling along the pavement ahead of me. I slowed the car, bringing it to a halt. The engine rattled and rain bounced off its red bonnet. Winding the window down, I peered through the gap and called out to the figure that walked stooped forward, a dark hood pulled up over its head.

"Excuse me," I called out, my breath forming tiny clouds in the cold. The hunched figure, stopped dead in its tracks, back still facing me. I tried again. "Hello?"

Slowly, the figure turned on the spot, the hem of the long coat it wore trailing in the deep puddles that filled the cracked pavement. Two gleaming eyes stared at me from beneath the hood. I drew a sudden breath in surprise at the wizened looking face peering out of the shadows beneath the hood. It was difficult for me to guess the man's age, as his face was a network of deep groves and wrinkles. His skin was white and fleshy where the wrinkles hung

loose like sacks of skin beneath his eyes. The corners of his thin bloodless lips were twisted in what looked like a painful grimace. But even though his face looked worn and old, his eyes were sharp and keen, shining a brilliant blue from beneath his hood. He continued to stare at me and say nothing.

"I'm looking for a place called The Crescent Moon Inn," I said, inching the window closed so only the smallest of gaps was left for me to speak through.

Still staring at me from beneath his hood, the stranger raised one gnarled finger and placed it against his cracked lips. "Shhh!" he almost seemed to hiss. Then, lowering his head, he turned away and continued to shuffle forwards along the street, rain dripping from his hood.

I closed the window and from the safety of my car, I sat and watched the stranger until he had disappeared into the gloom ahead. Once I was sure he had gone, I started my car again and crept forward. I reached the end of the street, slowed and looked left and right. I couldn't see him in either direction. It was like he had vanished. Indicating right, I turned into yet another narrow, cobbled street, where the houses and shops stood crammed next to one another. It was then, I noticed that same hooded figure watching me from the darkness of a nearby shop doorway. Looking front, and goose flesh crawling over my skin, I sped up.

It was just before six when I noticed a small side street that I hadn't seen before. Turning into it, my car bounced and lurched over the cobbled road until in the distance, I could just make out the glow of a blue lamp attached to the front of a white-washed building. Any anxiety I had early felt

disappeared upon seeing it. I knew I'd found the police station where I had been posted to. They would be able to point me in the right direction to my lodgings, and it would give me a chance to meet with some of my colleagues before I started my first nightshift the following evening.

Parking the car just outside, I pulled my jacket tight about my shoulders and ran towards the old, wooden door below the blue lamp. Pushing against it, I stumbled into the station and out of the howling wind and driving rain. I must have looked a right sight, my black hair matted in dark, wet streaks to my forehead and cheeks, my face pale with the cold.

"Can I help you?" someone asked me.

Looking up, I could see a small front counter. Sitting behind it was a police officer. He had short, grey hair and was clean-shaven. He was about forty-years-old. He was dressed in his uniform and was sucking on an old-looking pipe, which pumped clouds of blue smoke into the air.

"Can I help you?" he asked again.

Straightening my hair and pulling it from my face, I smiled and said, "I'm Kiera."

He looked back at me as if he didn't have the slightest idea as to what I was talking about. Holding out my hand for him to shake, I stepped towards the front counter and said, "I'm Kiera Hudson. The new recruit?"

Again he looked at me as if I were speaking in a foreign language. Lowering my hand, I added, "Force headquarters sent me. I'm to be stationed here." Then with a sudden look of recognition on his face, he stood up and came towards me. It was then I noticed he wasn't in full uniform at all, but was wearing a pair of jeans and carpet slippers. He appeared to lean to the right as he walked, as if he had a limp.

"Hudson," he said, thumbing through some paperwork on the other side of the counter. "Hudson. Kiera. Oh, yes," he said, plucking my file from beneath a mountain of paperwork. Then, looking back at me, he said, "You know you're getting old when the new recruits look younger than your daughters."

Noticing the three stripes on his shoulders, I asked, "Are you in charge here?"

Placing my file to one side, he smiled back at me and said, "Kind of, but not really. I'm Sergeant Murphy – 'Murphy' to my friends," and thrust out his hand. Taking it, he pumped my arm up and down until I thought it might just fall off. "We do have Chief Inspector Rom, but we don't see him much. He pops his head in from time to time and that's the way we like it. Don't want the boss nosing around," he said, winking at me as he puffed on his pipe again.

Knocking the fringe from my eyes, I noticed Sergeant Murphy was wearing a small tiepin which was in the shape of a crucifix. I thought this was a little odd as we'd had it instilled in us at training school that we were only to wear police insignia on our uniforms – nothing else, especially not anything that was religious or might cause offense.

Sergeant Murphy saw me looking, and his fingers went straight to it. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "Straight from training school where you've had your head crammed full of all the things you should and shouldn't do."

"No," I said, shaking my head, not wanting to offend my new sergeant in the first few moments of meeting him.

"Well, let me tell you something, little lady," he said leaning over the counter towards me, his voice dropping to a whisper. "This little cross here will offer you more protection than any can of CS spray, a baton, or a Taser. They don't mean diddly-shit in The Ragged Cove."

"Don't listen to the old fart," someone said from behind me.

Spinning round, I saw another police officer step into the station out of the rain. His raincoat dripped water all over the floor, and it ran from the brim of his helmet. Taking it from his head, he shook the rain off. Unlike Sergeant Murphy, this police officer was younger, no older than twenty-two. He had short, black wavy hair, green eyes, and a handsome face.

"I'm sorry?" I asked, taken aback by his sudden presence. His jaw line was sharp and square and he had such a deep cleft chin that it looked as if it had been made with a nail gun. Although he was clean-shaven, the lower half of his face was shadowed where black stubble hid just beneath the surface.

"I said, take no notice of the old fart," he smiled, looking over my shoulder at Sergeant Murphy.

"You show some respect," Murphy said, but he didn't sound angry, it was as if it were a joke he shared with this officer.

Taking off his black raincoat and draping it over the counter, he turned to me and said, "I'm Luke Bishop." Then smiling, he added, "The one who does all the work around here."

"You don't know the meaning of the word," Sergeant Murphy scoffed, going back to his seat where he propped his slippered feet up onto his desk and sucked on his pipe.

"So you must be Constable Hudson?" Luke asked.

"Kiera," I replied, shaking his hand.

"Good to meet you," Luke said, and I couldn't help but notice that he held my gaze just a little too long – long enough to make me feel uncomfortable. Looking away, I noticed the sign above the counter that read:

It is against the law to smoke anywhere on these premises.

Then, looking over at my new sergeant with the pipe dangling from his mouth, he winked at me again and picked up some of the paperwork that littered his desk.

I was immediately struck by the lack of professionalism

Sergeant Murphy showed, and it felt at odds with the almost military-style of policing instilled in me at training school.

"I thought you started your shift with us tomorrow night?" Luke said, cutting into my thoughts. "You're a night early," he smiled, and it was a smile that seemed to light up his whole face.

"I can't find my digs," I told him.

"Where are you staying?" he asked.

"The Crescent Moon Inn," I said, and I couldn't help but notice the look that passed between Luke and Sergeant Murphy across the counter.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked.

Shaking his head, Luke said, "No, there's nothing wrong. I'll show you where it is." Throwing on his overcoat again and grabbing his helmet, I followed Luke outside. As I swung the police station door closed behind me, I could just see the top of Murphy's head on the other side of the counter.

"Welcome to the sleepy town of The Ragged Cove, Kiera Hudson. I'll see you tomorrow night at seven for the start of your first vampire shift."

Not knowing what he meant, I let the door swing shut and I stepped out into the rain again.

"Is this yours?" Luke asked, looking at my beat up old Mini. "Yeah, why?" I asked, feeling proud of my little red car.

"Nothing." Luke grinned, going to the passenger side.

Opening my door, I got in. Throwing his helmet into the back, Luke wedged himself into the front seat. His legs were so long that his knees seemed to rest just beneath his chin. Smiling to myself, I put the car into gear and we rumbled off up the street.

We sat in silence, and I felt uncomfortable. "So where is this Inn?" I asked, trying to make conversation.

"It's a mile or so up the road from here. Just take a right at the top," he said.

"So what's with the crucifix and all this stuff about starting my first 'vampire shift' tomorrow night?" I asked above the sound of the wipers as

they squeaked back and forth in the rain.

"Oh, that's just the sarge trying to be funny," Luke said, staring straight ahead into the dark.

"I don't think he was trying to be funny. It was as if he were trying to give me a warning," I told him.

Glancing sideways at me, Luke said, "Look, some strange things have happened here in the last few years or so, that's all."

"What do you mean by *strange*?" I asked him, struggling to see in the dark.

"Well, apart from some of the new recruits that have been sent from headquarters going missing, we've also had our fair share of grave desecrations and murders for such a small town," Luke said, looking back into the night.

"What do you mean by *missing*?" I asked, feeling intrigued rather than scared.

"Well, they don't show up for work. One day they're here and the next they're gone. Not even so much as a goodbye," Luke explained.

"What, they ask to be posted someplace else?" I asked.

"No, they just go missing," Luke said, and again he looked at me. "I guess they just leave the force altogether. Perhaps they realise that being a police officer isn't like watching cops on the T.V. and they quit and go find something else to do."

"But why?" I asked, slowing down to steer the car around a rather sharp bend in the road.

"Dunno – maybe they weren't expecting so much paperwork," he shrugged.

"But you can't have that much paperwork out here," I said. "It can't be that busy."

"You're right," he said. "We don't have a burglary problem, robbery problem, or even that much antisocial behaviour. But like I said, we do have a murder problem, and they create mountains of paperwork."

Speeding up again, I asked, "So how many murders are we talking about?"

"Well if you exclude the thirty or so people that have gone missing, as no one really knows what's happened to them, we've had about twenty murders in the last three years or so."

"Twenty?" I gasped, nearly crashing the car into a nearby hedgerow.

"Some cities in the UK don't even have that amount in five years — let alone a small little town like this!"

"They started slow at first," he explained. "The first year we had three and a couple of disappearances. In the second year we had six murders – but this year they've escalated at a frightening rate."

"Are they connected?" I asked, still reeling from what he had just told me.

"The M.O. is the same in each case, if that's what you mean," he said.

"So you have a serial killer in The Ragged Cove?" I asked him, not being able to comprehend what he was telling me. How my colleagues had been dumb enough to turn down a posting like this was beyond me. Some officers could wait a lifetime before they came anywhere close to even getting a whiff of a serial killer case and here I was right in the middle of one, just days out of training school.

"I don't think it's the work of a serial killer," Luke said, glancing at me again.

"But you said the M.O. was the same in each murder," I reminded him.

"It is the same," he said, then added, "but there is more than one killer."

Gripping the steering wheel so tight that my knuckles glowed white through the skin, I asked, "How can you be so sure?"

"There are always more than one set of prints at the scene and the..." he trailed off.

"And what?" I asked, almost ready to pee in my pants.

"Forensics say the tooth marks come from different sets of teeth," he said.

"Tooth marks?" I almost screeched.

"Yeah, tooth marks," Luke said in a grim tone. "At first we thought they were the tooth marks of an animal because -"

Luke was suddenly interrupted as the airwaves radio attached to his coat began to talk in the sound of Sergeant Murphy's voice.

"Echo One to Echo Three, receiving?" and his voice came through, mixed with the sound of static.

Speaking into the radio, Luke said, "Go ahead, sarge – what you got?"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this," Murphy's voice crackled back over the radio, "but Farmer Moore reckons his dog has just come across the remains of the Blake kid who went missing a couple of days ago."

Taking a deep breath, Luke seemed to gather himself together, then said into the radio, "Okay, sarge, I'll make my way straight there." Then looking at me he said, "Fancy starting your duties a night early?"

"You bet," I told him, my stomach beginning to buzz with nerves and excitement.

"Okay then," Luke smiled, "Welcome to your first vampire shift."

Chapter Two

Luke directed me along a narrow coastal road, and above the sound of the rain and the wind, I could hear those black waves crashing into the cliffs below. At one point, a gust of wind took hold of my tiny car, and I felt the pull of the back wheels as they headed towards the cliff edge. Gasping out loud, I yanked on the wheel and straightened the car. Luke sat beside me and said nothing, his face white and drawn-looking.

As we cleared the coastal road, Luke pointed in the direction of a narrow track and I followed it. At the top, there was a gate which led into a field. Killing the engine but keeping the headlights on, we climbed from the car. Waiting at the gate for us was a short man with a curved back. He stooped forward and used a stick to support himself. He wore a cloth cap pulled so far down his face; it was difficult to see his eyes. Yapping about his heels was a black and white collie.

"Evening, Constable," the man said.

"Good to see you, Moore," Luke said, and the two men briefly shook hands. Moore glanced up at me from beneath the rim of his cap. His ancient face was specked with what looked like festering sores and a cluster of white whiskers covered his chin. Without taking his eyes off me, he said to Luke, "Who's the girl?"

"This is Constable Hudson," Luke said. "A new recruit, fresh out of the box."

"I wonder how long she'll last?" Moore asked, and as he spoke I could see that where once he'd had teeth, there were now a set of fleshly gums.

"Where's the body?" Luke asked, pulling a torch from his utility belt and switching it on.

"Up beyond that treeline," Moore said, waving his stick in the general direction of a crop of trees that lined his fields. "I'm warning you though, the kid don't look pretty."

Flashing his torch towards the trees, Luke said, "You wait here, Moore." Then looking back at me, he said, "Ready?"

Pulling the collar of my jacket around my throat, I nodded. I didn't know if I were ready or not. I'd seen dead bodies before during some cases I had investigated with the help of my friend and colleague Tom Henderson, while still at training school. But thankfully, I had never seen the dead body of a child before. I pushed those memories of those previous mysteries and my friend Tom Henderson from my mind and followed Luke. We made our way across the fields towards the trees. The earth was sodden, and my trainers squelched in the mud. At one point, my foot got stuck and I thought I might just lose my shoe. Pulling me free, Luke took me by the arm and guided me across the field.

Stepping beneath the canopy of trees, the rain seemed to ease, trapped by the leaves above. Shining his torch on the ground ahead of us, Luke went deeper into the crop of trees. It was early quiet and I could hear the sound of my own heart thumping in my ears. Without warning, Luke dashed ahead, shouting over his shoulder, "Look – over here!"

I followed, and as I did, I could just make out the shape of something lying face-up in the damp undergrowth beneath the trees. From a distance it looked like a pile of rags, but as I got nearer, I could see that it was the body of a small boy. He was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt which had been ripped open down the front. Luke waved the torchlight up and down the body of the boy. His face looked white and bloated but it wasn't that which sickened me; it was the look of fear forever engraved upon his small face. I had never seen the look of such terror before, and I shivered at the thought of what his attacker must have looked like.

Bending down, Luke got onto all fours, and for a moment, blocked my view of the boy. He seemed to be examining him.

"It's definitely Henry Blake," Luke said.

"How can you be so sure?" I asked, hunkering down beside him.

"Had dealings with the boy before," Luke said. "Nothing serious – just chucking stones and being a nuisance, that's all."

It was then, as I knelt beside Luke, that I saw the injuries to Henry Blake's throat – or what was left of it. From just beneath his chin to his chest plate, the flesh was missing, ripped and torn away in jagged chunks.

Covering my mouth with my hands, I lurched to one side, desperate not to be sick on my first night and not in front of Luke.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked, looking at me. I could see the concern in his eyes.

"Sure," I said, swallowing hard to push away the bile that was burning the back of my throat.

"If you need a moment..." Luke started and put his arm out to rub my back.

Knocking it away, I stood up and tried to regain my composure. "I reckon he died about three days ago," I said, trying to sound like a police officer instead of some emotional wreck.

"How do you know that?" Luke asked me. And by the tone of his voice, he sounded as if what he really wanted to say was, "How would you know anything? You've only been a cop five minutes!"

"See those blisters," I said, pointing to the yellowing bubbles on the boy's arms and legs.

"What about them?" Luke asked.

"Notice how the body is swollen and bloated?" I asked him.

"So?" Luke came back at me.

"And that fluid which has leaked from his mouth, nose, and ears?"

"What are you trying to say?" Luke asked.

"They're all things that happen to a body about three days after death," I told him. "Although I could be a day out, it all depends on how warm the weather has been."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Luke asked, looking at me.

"The whole process of the body bloating like that can be sped up, depending on how hot the environment is," I told him.

Smiling at me he said, "Where did you learn all that stuff?"

"My dad used to be a pathologist," I told him.

"Used to be?" he asked.

"He died recently – cancer," I said.

"Sorry to hear that."

"Me too," I said, looking down at the mutilated boy stretched out before us. "My dad was always telling me all kinds of weird stuff about bodies and things. It was kind of gruesome but it always fascinated me."

"What else can you see, Sherlock?" Luke said, smiling.

Taking the torch from him, I cast light over the scene. "The boy was brought or carried here," I said.

"How can you tell?" Luke asked with a frown.

"Look at his trainers," I told him. "There's no mud. If he walked here, there'd have to be mud, right?"

"I guess," Luke said.

"But wait a minute," I whispered, kneeling down again and checking the ground around the boy's body. I traced the tips of my fingers over the earth and dead leaves then inspected the boy. "That doesn't make sense," I said.

"What doesn't?" Luke asked, sounding confused.

"The boy was murdered here – look, you can see the ground is spattered with his blood."

"So what's the problem?"

"Apart from the boy, there were three others," I told him. "All of them were adults. Two were male, the third was female. The first male was about six-foot-two, the second shorter, about five-ten. He smoked Marlboro cigarettes, Lights in fact. But he came before the others. He had been waiting for them, I guess anywhere between one and two hours. The female was about five-six and had black hair which was dyed blonde."

"Are you making all this shit up?" Luke asked from behind me. "You know, just because you're new to the job, you don't have to try and impress me."

"Shhh," I said, not taking my eyes off the ground. "But there's something wrong."

"What?" he started to sound impatient.

"They can't all have been carried here," I said, more to myself than him. "I can understand them carrying the victim here, but..."

"But what?" Luke hissed from behind me, and he sounded pissed off.

"Look, you can see the ground around the body is covered with footprints," I said.

"Yeah, so?" Luke said, leaning over my shoulder.

"Well, there are no footprints leading to or from the body," I told him.

"And your point is?" Luke asked.

"So how did the killers get here if they didn't walk?" I said, sounding exasperated. "Did they fly?"

Then, before Luke or even I could answer my own question, there was the sound of people approaching us from the distance.

"Who's there?" Luke called out, sounding spooked.

"It's just me and Constable Potter."

Aiming Luke's torch in the direction of the voice, I could just make out two figures approaching us. As they drew nearer, I could see one of them was Sergeant Murphy by the way he stooped to the right and the other I guessed was Constable Potter. He was tall and lean, with black hair that was slicked back off his forehead. He looked slightly older than Luke and I guessed he was about twenty-four-years-old. Both Murphy and Potter had torches, the lights bouncing off the trees.

Reaching us, Sergeant Murphy leaned over the body of the boy and showered him with torch light. "Jesus wept!" he gasped, kissing the tiny crucifix pinned to his tie.

"It looks like we've got ourselves another one," Potter groaned, popping a cigarette between his lips and lighting it.

"I don't think you should be smoking here," I said before I could stop myself.

Raising an eyebrow with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, Constable Potter looked at me and said, "And you are?"

Before I could answer, Murphy had cut in and said, "This is Kiera Hudson, our new recruit."

Drawing on the end of his cigarette, Potter smiled at me and asked, "Do you have a problem with me smoking?"

Meeting his stare, I said, "No, but I just don't think you should be smoking here – after all it is a crime scene. At training school -"

"...they fill your head with shit," Potter cut in. "This is the real world, sweetheart."

I was just about to tell him that I wasn't his sweetheart when Luke said, "Kiera says that there was three of them and that the boy has been here at least three days."

I don't think Luke said this to embarrass me, I think he really was impressed with what I had told him.

Blowing smoke out of his nostrils, Potter laughed and said, "Looks like we got a right little Miss Marple this time around."

Eyeing Potter, Sergeant Murphy said, "Okay, Sean that's enough. Let's hear what the girl's got to say."

At first I didn't say anything, fearing Potter would start ragging on me again. I know that I'd only just met him, but I already disliked the guy.

"Go on, Kiera, tell them what you told me," Luke said, and he sounded supportive, like a good friend would.

"Go on, Hudson," Sergeant Murphy urged. "You're with friends here."

So, pointing the torch back at the body of Henry Blake, I crouched down and started to point out the footprints, blisters, and fluid which had come from the boy's mouth, nose, and ears. Before I'd finished, Potter had started to spray laughter into the darkness.

"What a bunch of horseshit!" he cried. "I don't know what they've been teaching you at training school but whatever it is, you ain't in no episode of *CSI*."

Standing, I looked at Luke and felt embarrassed, wishing I hadn't said anything.

When Potter had stopped laughing, he flicked his cigarette away into a nearby bush and Sergeant Murphy stepped towards me.

"I admire your enthusiasm, Kiera, but Sean is right, this ain't no T.V. program, this is real life. Being a police officer in the real world ain't like what you've been watching on T.V."

Although Murphy was trying to comfort me, I couldn't help but feel he was patronising me.

"I haven't been watching -" I started.

"Kiera, this is a well-walked route by hikers and ramblers. Those footprints could have been left here by anyone. So what if there aren't any tracks leading to and from the murder scene? As far as we know, it could have been a really hot day and the earth could've been as dry as a bone."

I wanted to tell him that in the cool shade of the trees, it was very unlikely that the ground would've been rock-hard, but I knew there was little point. He didn't want some newbie coming into his town and telling him how to do his job. So, however much it pained me, I kept quiet.

I was damp from the rain and cold. Not being able to hide my shivers any longer, Luke approached me, and wrapping an arm about my shoulders, he said, "C'mon, let me get you to your room."

Without any resistance, I let Luke guide me away from the mutilated body of the boy. As I went, I looked back to see Potter lighting up another cigarette. Looking at me, he smiled and blew a cloud of smoke up into the night. I watched the smoke rise upwards, and as it dispersed, I noticed something. Aiming Luke's torch up into the trees, I could see the branches above the boy were snapped and broken as if someone or something had crashed through them.

Turning away, I let Luke lead me to my car. Ten minutes later, I was pulling up outside the Crescent Moon Inn.

"Is this it?" I asked, looking out of the window at the weary-looking building. It almost seemed to lean to the right, as if at any moment it was going to topple over. The roof was thatched and the windows were lattice in design. Wild ivy climbed over the front of the Inn and up across the roof like a giant, green claw. The windows glowed orange from within and a sign which read *The Crescent Moon Inn* wailed back and forth in the wind.

Swinging open the passenger door, Luke went to climb out, but then stopped. Looking back at me he said, "You weren't making that stuff up back there, were you?"

"No," I replied.

"So how did you figure it all out?" he asked, staring at me again and making me feel uncomfortable. "How did you know how tall the killers were, the fact that one of them had arrived before the others, his brand of cigarettes, and that the female had black hair which she had dyed blonde? You musta been guessing some of that."

"I wasn't guessing," I told him.

"What then? Are you some kind of psychic?" and he half-laughed.

"It doesn't matter," I told him, climbing from the car.

Putting his helmet onto his head and pulling the collar of his police coat up about his neck, he said, "So long, Kiera Hudson. I'll see you tomorrow night at seven."

Then turning towards the Inn, just wanting to get out of the rain, I head towards the door, then stopped. Seeing as I now knew where the Inn was, I should really have offered Luke a lift back to the police station. But as I turned back towards him, I was surprised to see that he had already gone.

Chapter Three

Carrying what little belongings I'd brought with me, I went into the Inn. A crescent-shaped bar stood along the far wall. The Inn wasn't very busy, and those huddled around the small fire and the tables fell into a hushed silence and looked at me. As I crossed the floor to the bar, I could feel their eyes on me. It was so quiet I could hear the wood snapping and crackling as it burnt in the fireplace. I looked across at it and noticed that someone had engraved a five-pointed star into the plaster above the fireplace. Then, in the far corner, I noticed a figure. He sat alone at a table which was lit with a candle and he warmed a glass of whiskey in his hand. The male had a hood pulled so low over his head that it concealed his face. Although I couldn't see his eyes, I knew he was watching me. At first I thought that perhaps it was the old stranger I had first seen on arriving in The Ragged Cove, but his hands were free of wrinkles and the fingers were long and straight, not gnarled and crooked like a bunch of broken twigs.

Trying not to make eye contact with those gathered in the Inn, I reached the bar. I had never felt so uncomfortable in my life, and I wondered why Sergeant Phillips had decided to rent me a room in such a godforsaken place. When I thought I couldn't bear their stares any longer and was just

about to pick up my case and run from the place, an elderly woman appeared from a small office behind the bar. White lengths of wispy hair protruded from her head, and her face was haggard and lined with deep, ragged wrinkles. She looked like a corpse that had been warmed up.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her voice sounding weak and broken.

"I have a room booked..." I started.

"Name?" the old woman asked, thumbing through a dusty ledger behind the bar.

"Hudson," I said. "Kiera Hudson."

The woman sniffed, and taking a key from a series of hooks on the wall behind her, she placed it on the bar and said, "Room number two."

Taking the key, I said, "Thank -"

"Top of the stairs and turn right," the old woman cut over me.

"Breakfast is between six and seven, and dinner between eight and ten."

Looking at my wristwatch, I could see it had just gone ten. "I don't suppose there's any chance of something to eat?" I asked her.

"Dinner is between eight and ten," she repeated without looking up at me.

"I know, but it's only just a couple of minutes past, so I was wondering -" I began.

"Between eight and ten," the old woman said again, but this time she looked up at me. Her eyes were milky-coloured and clouded with cataracts.

Shrugging my shoulders as if I didn't really care, I picked up my case and as I did, I noticed something rather odd. All the way along the old oak

beams that supported the bar, someone had tied reams of garlic bulbs. There were hundreds – no thousands of them. As I looked up, I could see they hung from the ceiling, the back of the Inn door and walls.

"What's with the garlic?" I asked, turning towards the old woman, but she had disappeared back into her tiny office. Turning my back on all those watchful eyes, I made my way up the stairs to my room. Holding onto my case, I fumbled with the key as I slipped it into the lock. Hearing it click, I pushed the door open and shut it behind me. The room was in darkness, so I ran my fingers blindly along the wall in search of the light switch. Finding it, I flipped it on, and the room lit up with a dim bulb that hung from the centre of the ceiling. I looked around my new home and understood why none of the other recruits had stayed a full year in this place.

There was a narrow bed wedged in the far corner, an old fashioned-looking wardrobe, and a desk with a lamp. The carpet looked threadbare, and the walls were a dingy, grey colour. There was a small bathroom, which had a toilet and bath. I didn't know how much headquarters was paying the old woman downstairs, but whatever it was, they were being ripped off.

Placing my case onto the bed, I went to the bathroom and ran myself a bath. While it was running, I unpacked my stuff and hung it in the wardrobe. When I was all fixed up, I got undressed and climbed into the hot water. Closing my eyes, I leant my head back against the rim of the bath. I thought about everything that had happened since arriving at The Ragged Cove and my mind soon wandered to Luke Bishop. Out of everyone I had met so far, he seemed the nicest. He had a kind and honest way about him,

and I was grateful he took my side over that of Potter, who seemed like a real prick. Loved himself, too, by the way he was acting all cocky. Sergeant Murphy, I was still to make up my mind about. He seemed set in his ways and I guessed he didn't want some young cop coming in and telling him how to run things. But I wasn't trying to do that. I didn't care that he wanted to lounge around the police station all night in his slippers, smoking a pipe. But what did trouble me was his apparent disregard for properly investigating a crime scene, and not any old crime scene. That was the murder of an eight-year-old child and he was letting that idiot Potter smoke and trample all over it.

If only they'd taken the time to study it, they would have *seen* the things that I had. It wasn't magic – the clues were there if you looked for them. I'd always been like that. My father had called it my 'gift' – but it wasn't really – I just had a knack of noticing things that others seemed unable to see. I saw stuff that other people missed. But it wasn't magic and it wasn't a 'gift', I called it 'seeing'.

But what about Luke? What could I *see* about him? Nothing. He was like a blank sheet of paper. Apart from his obvious good looks and incredible smile, it was the fact that he was a mystery that I found so attractive. I felt a sudden pang of guilt as I thought of my friend Tom Henderson. Friend? More than a friend? That was over now. It had to be. It was the best thing for both of us. But it hurt to think of him and what he might be doing right now. Was he thinking of me too? Or had he met someone new? A small part of me hoped that he had. I just wanted Tom to be happy and I knew he wanted the

same for me too. But for now we had to stay apart. Perhaps one day – in a different time and place – we might be together again. But I was just torturing myself even thinking like that. So, sinking beneath the hot water, I let images of the Blake boy lying dead with his throat ripped out, ripple across the front of my mind as I concentrated on the crime I had been presented with. There were two things that troubled me. My father had often told me that you could tell a lot from a crime scene by the pattern of blood left behind. But that was the problem – there was very little blood for such a gaping wound. The brachiocephalic artery had been ripped apart and I remembered my father telling me once how he had worked on a murder where the victim had had their throat cut. Their life blood had pumped away through the wound in that particular artery.

How then had there been so little blood at the murder scene of the Blake boy? Where had all the blood gone? It was almost as if it had been siphoned off, and what about the lack of footprints leading to and from the scene? I didn't buy Murphy's theory about the ground being too dry for any prints to be left. If prints could be lifted from carpets and lino floors, they could be seen in earth – how ever dry. But how had the killers gotten to the scene? The only clue was the hole made in the trees above, where the branches had been broken and smashed. It was almost as if someone or something had entered the crime scene from above. But that would be impossible, right?

As I tried to examine these theories inside my head, I was startled by the sound of someone outside my bedroom door. Leaping from the bath, I wrapped a towel around me and went into the bedroom. Tiptoeing to the door, I listened to the rustling sound. Screwing up my eyes, I could see a shadow fleeting back and forth in the gap beneath my door.

Reaching out for the key I'd left in the lock, I called out, "Who's there?"

There was silence.

"What do you want?"

Then I heard the sound of footsteps rushing away. Holding the towel tight about me, I yanked open the door and peered along the landing. And as I did, I caught the last fleeting glimpse of a shadow disappearing down the stairs. My instincts told me to run after them to find out who it had been. But with nothing on except the bath towel, I reluctantly stepped back into my room, and as I did, I noticed a small white envelope tacked to the door.

I removed it and went back inside. Across the front of the envelope someone had scribbled 'Kiera'. I sat on my bed, and as I opened it, a small silver crucifix fell out into my hand. Placing it on the desk beside my bed, I went back to the envelope. My heart skipped a beat, as I could *see* from looking at it, that the person I'd seen sitting in the bar with their face hidden behind the hood, was the person responsible for leaving me the crucifix.

Chapter Four

I woke early, just before six. I didn't want to miss breakfast like I'd missed dinner the night before. The owner of the Inn seemed particularly strict on the rules surrounding meal times.

As I pulled on a sweatshirt, jogging bottoms, and trainers, my stomach groaned. It was then I realised I hadn't eaten anything since before leaving my home in Havensfield the day before. As I made my way down to the dining area, I switched on my mobile phone. I scrolled through my contact list, until I came across 'Sergeant Phillips'. I pressed the call button, but all I got back was an unobtainable tone. As I reached the dining area, I noticed the signal bar on my phone was red, indicating that it was unable to find a signal.

Putting the phone in my pocket, I was frustrated that I couldn't get hold of Phillips. I wanted to ask if he could find me some better accommodation. The old woman I'd spoken with the night before trundled over to my table which had been laid with a bowl, plate, and a mug. Apart from me, the small eating area was deserted.

"Tea or coffee?" the old woman croaked, not looking up from a small pad she held in her liver-spotted hands.

"Good morning," I smiled, hoping to get off on a better footing with her than I had the night before.

"Tea or coffee?" the woman asked again, and her eyes met mine with her glazed stare.

"Coffee, please," I told her, trying to keep my smile.

"Bacon and eggs?" the woman asked, the pen poised over her note pad.

"Just toast please." Although I was hungry, I wanted to go for a run and I didn't want to be bloated out with a stomach full of greasy bacon and eggs.

"Toast," the woman said, turning away and shuffling towards the kitchen. The dining area, like the bar, was decorated with cloves of garlic, but with one difference. Along the far wall was a small coffee table which was covered with a white lace cloth. On top were an arrangement of crucifixes and small bottles of water. Someone had written the words 'Holy Water' across each bottle with a black marker pen.

Smiling to myself, as I wasn't superstitious at all, I got up from my seat and crossed over to the table. The crucifixes were identical to the one that had been left for me the night before. Picking up one of the tiny bottles of water, I heard the old woman speak to me as she shuffled towards my table with a plate of toast.

"They're for sale, if you want one." she said, placing the plate on the table.

Putting the little bottle of holy water back with the others, I crossed back to my table and sat down.

"Why would I want to buy a bottle of holy water?" I asked her, and took a bite of the toast.

"For protection," she said, pouring a cup of coffee.

"Protection from what?" I asked, half-smiling.

Glancing back over her shoulder as if she were scared someone might be eavesdropping, she leant in towards me and whispered, "From the vampires," and her breath smelt stale and warm against my face.

Looking straight back at her, I said, "I don't believe in vampires."

"That's what the others said when I tried to warn them," she hushed, snatching another quick look over her shoulder.

"Who?" I asked, sipping my coffee.

"The other ones," she sighed, starting to sound impatient. "The other police officers who came here before you."

Looking into her milky-grey eyes I asked, "Do you know what happened to them?"

"They -" she started but was cut dead by a gruff-sounding voice from the other side of the room.

"That's enough, mother!" the voice said, and I looked up to see a fat, balding man come waddling into the dining area. He wore a red chequered shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows and a white apron that was smeared with old food and drink. His cheeks were flushed red and his forehead glistened with sweat.

"The girl has a right to know!" the old woman barked at him.

"There's nothing for her to *know*!" her son snapped back. Then, crossing towards the table with the bottles of holy water and crucifixes, he added, "And how many times have I told you to get rid of all this bloody nonsense?"

"You keep a civil tongue in your head, Roland!" the old woman hissed.

"This is still my Inn – it ain't yours yet."

"But you're scaring away all the customers," he told her, his jowls wobbling.

"It ain't me that's scaring 'em off," she snapped at him. "It's those things – those *creatures*!"

Roland saw me staring at both of them as they argued in front of me. With a fake smile stretched across his face, he wiped his meaty hands on his apron and came towards me saying, "I'm sorry about mother. Don't be put off by what she says."

Munching on the last of the toast, I smiled and said, "Don't worry about me, I'm not easily spooked."

Hearing this, the old woman hobbled towards me and leaning into my face she gasped, "You *will* be."

Taking his mother by the arm, he escorted her from the room and back into the kitchen. Within moments, he had returned and came to clear away my empty plate and mug.

"So what is all this stuff about vampires?" I asked him.

"Just stories," he said, without looking at me. "Okay, the town has had more than its fair share of strange goings on, but I don't agree with all this scaremongering. It was good for business at first. People came from all over to visit the town, believing it to be infested with vampires. We did the Inn up as you can see, and we even did a roaring trade in those little crosses and bottles of water, but it was just a laugh, you know, to attract the tourists," he told me.

"So what went wrong?" I asked him.

"More and more murders started to happen. People started to go missing and then there was the grave robbing," he said, wringing his hands together.

"Grave robbing?"

"Yeah, but it was more than that," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "The bodies of those poor murdered souls were being dug up and stolen."

"By whom?" I asked him.

"Greedy freaks, that's who," he spat. "The whole thing just started to get out of hand. People were making a lot of money — me included — off the back of the rumours being spread about the vampires. But people got bored or scared of The Ragged Cove, and just stopped coming. The guest houses started to empty, the restaurants had no bookings, and then High Street became deserted. So the incidents just got more and more bizarre, and I reckon it was all down to some of the locals, hoping that they could entice

people back by strange evil-doings and stories. Everybody likes a good scare, don't they?"

"I guess," I said. "But digging up the bodies of murder victims seems a bit extreme."

"Not if you've got mouths to feed and a business to keep going," he said. "Folk will do the strangest of things to survive."

"But what about these murders?" I asked him, interested to see what his view was. Like me, he hadn't been hooked on the whole vampire thing.

"Undoubtedly there is a murderer in our midst," he said, and again his voice had dropped to a whisper. "But I reckon all this attention is just encouraging him, getting him all excited-like."

I didn't tell him about the three sets of tracks I had found by Henry Blake's body. I let him continue to believe the murders were being committed by just the one killer.

"What do you mean 'excited'?" I asked.

"These serial killers love all the attention they get from the media, don't they," he said more as a statement than a question. "Seen it on the T.V. I have. They love it when the newspapers give 'em a name like 'The Ripper' or 'The Black Panther', makes 'em feel all important like – when really, they're nothing but scum," he said.

"So do you have any ideas?" I asked him.

"About what?" he asked.

"Who this serial killer might be," I said, staring at him.

Then, looking straight back at me, Roland said, "Shouldn't I be the one asking you that question? After all, you're the police officer, ain't ya?"

Getting up from my seat, I said, "I'm working on it."

"You make sure you do, pretty lady, 'cos that sergeant of yours couldn't find his own arse with both hands and a flashlight," he said as I reached the door.

Looking back at him, I said, "I'm sure Sergeant Murphy is doing his best." But in my heart, I doubted he was.

Chapter Five

The morning was overcast and dreary, but at least the rain from the night before had stopped. I didn't know the area at all, and I thought I would spend the morning getting to know it. My first official nightshift started at seven, and I wanted to get a feel for the place and its people before I started policing it. If I were going to be successful in my new post, I would have to know my patch.

Heading back in the direction Luke had brought me the night before, I started a slow jog. There were no pavements and I had to keep to the side of the road. In some places, the undergrowth was so overgrown; I had to run further out into the road. It wasn't as if I were putting myself in danger, as the roads seemed deserted. Not one car or person had passed me in the last twenty minutes or so.

Slowing down, I looked left then right, trying to decide on which way to go. Then, looking over my shoulder in the direction I'd come, my stomach tightened and my heart sped up as I saw the hooded figure from the previous night. He was cycling towards me, his face hidden by the same hoodie he'd worn before. Turning front again, I turned left, wondering if he would follow

me. I hadn't gone very far when I glanced back again, and to my surprise I saw him turn onto the narrow road I had taken.

I tried to tell myself that perhaps it was just coincidence that he was cycling the same stretch of road I'd chosen to jog along. But who was I trying to kid? He was following me. After all, I knew it had been him who had left that crucifix tacked to my door. But why? Perhaps I should ask him?

Slowing to a standstill in the middle of the road, I turned around. With my hands on my hips, I faced the oncoming hooded cyclist. Seeing I had stopped running, he stopped cycling. There was a long moment that seemed to stretch out forever, as I stared at him while he stared back at me from beneath his hood.

Turning my back on him, I started to run again, this time picking up my speed. After a short time I looked back, only to find he had started cycling again towards me. I slowed and so did he, always careful to keep a good distance between us. What did this guy want? I wondered. And why wouldn't he show his face?

Again, I stopped running and turned to face him. As I suspected he would, the cyclist stopped and just sat and watched me.

"What do you want?" I called out, and my voice sounded echoey as it travelled across the empty fields on either side of the road. "How do you know my name?"

The hooded guy said nothing, but just sat on his bike and looked at me from beneath his hood. Then, without giving him any warning, I ran as fast as I could towards him. He turned his bike around in the road and pedalled as fast as he could away from me.

Knowing I could never catch him, I slowed, doubled-up gasping for breath. Once I had stopped, so did the cyclist ahead of me. Turning his bike again in the road, he sat and watched me.

Drawing in lungful's of oxygen, I shouted as loud as I could, "Why did you leave me that crucifix?"

The cyclist, whoever he was, didn't respond; he just sat motionless on his bike.

"I know it was you!" I yelled at him. Turning, I started to run again. Okay, I thought. If he wanted to play games, I could play along. Ahead there was a bend in the road, and running as fast as I could, I raced towards it. I rounded the bend and saw that it opened out into a wide, open area of wild grass and sand, which led down through the cliffs and towards the cove. Off to the right was an outcrop of rocks. Diving behind them, I lay flat against the ground. From my hiding place, I could hear the sea crashing against the shore in the distance, and the sound of seagulls as they squawked overhead.

Peering around the rocks, I watched as the cyclist rode his bike onto the open area. He stopped, looking from left to right, his hood never moving, not offering the smallest glimpse of who was beneath it. After a few seconds, he rode forward and headed towards the rocks. As he drew nearer, I could see his hands were covered with gloves, and apart from the dark black hoodie, he wore blue jeans and trainers. There was a chill in the air, but I