

Turncoat  
by Kim Switzer

Jake turned the collar of his trench coat up, blocking the rising wind even though he couldn't really feel the cold. The February weather was turning, blowing in a snow storm, and he could feel ice on the wind. He strode along the deserted sidewalk, heading for home and the comforts of warmth and light that his body didn't need but his mind still craved even after three hundred years.

“Daddy!” Jake froze in mid stride, tilting his head. He wasn't sure he had actually heard anything. Maybe it had been the wind playing tricks on him. He was about to move on when he heard it again, a thin wail on the wind. He moved against the wall of the nearest building, flattening himself against the dusty red bricks and creeping toward the nearby alley. Now he could hear other voices, laughter and jeers. And then the pathetic cry again. “Daddy!”

Jake's jaw tightened. He ran his tongue over the tips of his incisors, pushed himself away from the wall and entered the alley, all attempts at concealment dropped. He walked straight down the center of the alley toward the voices, following the narrow path as it jogged to the right and opened into a wider area filled with overflowing trash bins, rotted food, and broken bottles. In the center of the open space, surrounded by three men, one of whom he recognized, was the source of the cries. A little girl, no more than six years old, dressed in flowered pink pajamas, her dark hair in pigtails was crouched in the middle of the circle of men.

One of the men turned when Jake scuffed his boot against the gravel to announce his presence. Jake recognized him from various gatherings. He was a youngish vampire, about fifty years old, named Barry. The other two were unknown to him, although he could smell that they were also vampires. Very young, he judged, probably no more than five or ten years old.

“Jake! Hey, how's it going?” the first man said, opening his arms in welcome. “Wasn't expecting you here, but hey. There's plenty of fun to go around.” Barry stepped sideways, shoving at one of the younger vampires, widening the circle and gesturing for Jake to step in.

Jake stepped into the circle and went straight to the middle, scooping the child up against his chest.

“Hey!” one of the youngsters yelled. “What the hell—we had her first!”

“Shut up,” Barry hissed. “That's Jake Mason. Just...just shut up.” The other vampire scowled but fell silent.

“So what's the plan, Jake” Barry asked, forcing a grin. “We gonna take her somewhere else or something?”

Jake met his grin with bared fangs and a snarl. He pushed the child behind a trash bin, motioning for her to stay down. “We're not taking her anywhere. Get out. This child is not yours.”

“What the hell. What do you mean?” Barry protested. “Why are you messing with our fun. We're not even in your territory.”

“This city was my territory before you were born as a human.”

“Yeah, whatever,” said one of the others. “There's more of us. Come on. We can take the old dude.”

Barry motioned him back. “Seriously, Jake, what's the problem.” His tone turned wheedling. “We can work something out, right? Just tell me what you need.”

“She's just a child,” Jake said. “She's a little girl.”

“So? What does that have to do with anything? Not like we haven't snatched kids before. You've done it yourself.”

“This one is too young.” Jake snarled at one of the vampires who was edging toward the child.

“Too young?” Barry asked. “Since when do we have an age limit?” His eyes widened in understanding. “She reminds you of your kid, right? I heard you had a daughter when you were human.” He nodded as if the whole thing made sense now.

“My reasons are none of your business,” Jake said. “Leave now, and we'll forget all about this.”

“Like hell,” the third vampire, silent until then, spoke up. He was tall, broad shouldered and thick chested. He rushed toward Jack with a growl, and his friend joined him. Barry hovered at the edge of the sudden violence, unsure of what to do.

Jake caught the first man as he leapt, grabbing his face with one hand and yanking him closer, ripping into his throat with his fangs then tossing him aside and turning toward the second man in time to grab him by the collar of his denim jacket and slam him into the brick wall hard enough to crumble the edges of the bricks where he hit. Then Jake turned to Barry. “You next?” he asked.

Barry hesitated, then shook his head. He backed up a few steps, hands held in front of him, then turned and ran. The man against the wall crawled a few feet after Barry then stumbled to his feet and ran down the alley, disappearing into the night.

Jake turned toward the sobbing child. “It's all right,” he said, voice barely above a whisper. He crouched in front of her, blocking her view of the dead vampire. “It's all right. We're going to go home now. Do you want to go home?”

The little girl nodded at him, her sobs diminishing to sniffles. “I want my dolly.”

Jake rose and held his hand out to her, nodding. “Dolly it is, then. She's probably missing you, too. Can you tell me where you live?”

The little girl nodded again. “With my mommy and daddy.”

Jake stifled a groan. “Of course.” He lifted the child in his arms, lowering his head to her hair and sniffing, getting her scent. “Let's see if we can find home, then.”

They moved through the silent city, the child giving occasional directions when she recognized something. Finally, they came to a park she knew. “My house is right over there!” Her voice rose in excitement.

They came to a house in the middle of a street that ended at one edge of the park. “There!” the girl cried, wiggling, trying to free herself from Jake's arms.

“Shh...” he carried her to the porch and set her down. He knocked, then melted into the shadows watching until the girl's bleary eyed parents opened the door.

“Goodbye, little girl,” Jake whispered, smiling as he watched the parents hug the child and hurry her inside. He turned and walked away, looking back once to be sure she was well and truly safe.

“This is going to be interesting,” he said out loud. He had heard of other vampires that protected the humans. It had never occurred to him to be one of them, but he felt a change coming on, a shift in the air that wasn't caused by the coming storm. He knew he was going to have a fight on his hands, and he knew that this was what he had been waiting for.

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