

## FRIEND OR FRIED FIEND?

By Jeanne M. Rideout

Lewis stared out the dark window, his jaw slack, his hazel eyes ringed with white. His face was soft and spongy, and she bet he was soft and spongy in other places, too. He jumped when she poked his arm.

“Here,” Stephanie whispered, shoving a lumpy bag into his hands. “I brought you more garlic.”

“Thank God,” he muttered out of the side of his mouth. “This place is made of bricks.”

Old bricks, crumbling bricks, with plenty of crannies where yellowed fingernails could get a hold, and anything might creep up to the second floor and peer in at him. Lewis had not slept in three nights. She knew that, because she was the one who slipped the amphetamines into his banana smoothies.

Below them, headlights shone in the courtyard as a Lincoln Town Car entered the driveway. Marliss emerged from the driver’s side, pulling her monkey fur jacket tight against the cool night. Her black hair drifted into the long ebony strands of the monkey fur, so there was no telling where her hair ended and the fur began.

Lewis’ Adam’s apple bounced like a basketball. He ripped open the paper sack, spilling half of the contents onto the rug, managing to grab three bulbs. He cut a length of twine off the spool by his chair, and, with trembling fingers, tied the garlic together to form a necklace.

A warped rectangle of light flowed onto the cobblestone walkway as the front door opened to allow Marliss inside. Stephanie could not see who was on the other side of the door, but she heard her husband’s laughter, and knew it was Troy welcoming Marliss. Stephanie’s fingernails dug into her palms and she felt the heat of her own blood. Troy would say, oh so innocently, that he and Marliss were just friends, but she knew, yes, yes, yes, she knew he lied.

If there wasn’t another woman, why else would Troy have asked her for a divorce?

Marliss was a vamp, and how appropriate to let Lewis add the “ire.” And how appropriate for Stephanie to add an “f” to the “ire,” because that’s what happened to vamps.

Outside, the light shone again into the courtyard, as the housekeeper opened the door for Troy’s black rottweiler to run the night. Marliss had gifted Troy with Rotty shortly after she had moved into the guest bedroom.

“If we can just survive the night, we can burn Marliss tomorrow.” Stephanie breathed the words into Lewis’ ear. “Troy will be in Boston all day, so he won’t be able to stop us.”

“What if he finds the bones?” Lewis quavered.

“He won’t. Vampire bones are ancient. When the fiend burns, those old bones will turn to ash,” Stephanie lied. She planned to hide the charred bones in a cooler chest in the basement. She’d be spending hours sawing each rib and body bone into doggie treats, but wouldn’t that be a labor of love! From here on in, Rotty was going to be her BFF.

“What if somebody sees the body before it’s all burnt up?” Lewis seemed to be losing his voice. He could barely choke out the words. Impatience teased at Stephanie’s stomach. Lewis

had the about the same IQ as the toast he served Troy at breakfast, but the cook's hands were large and strong.

"I've been doing yard work all week," Stephanie said. "The fire pit is chock-a-block full. The corpse will be completely covered." Lewis winced, but at least he shut up. "Just remember what you need to do tomorrow, Lewis. Don't back down. We're on borrowed time. If we don't Marliss, she'll get us." Stephanie clicked the door shut as she entered the hallway, leaving Lewis trapped in his small room with his wide-awake nightmare and one window vetting the night.

Marliss emerged from the guest bedroom, gliding toward the bathroom. A soft terry cloth robe, cut low over her full breasts, wrapped her slender body. A scarlet robe, contrasting her milky flesh and shapely white legs, better legs than Stephanie's. Her red glossy lips curved in a small smile at Stephanie.

"Please know I sympathize with you," Marliss said. "My husband divorced me because he couldn't accept some of my... how shall I phrase it?... my personality traits. But I am who I am, and being who I am does not make me a bad person. I felt hurt and betrayed when my husband left me, but then I realized that we must accept twists in the road in this journey we call life. I'm Troy's friend, and I hope you'll let me be your friend, too."

Marliss suggested dinner together some evening.

"I'm busy tonight, but we'll get together soon, I hope," Marliss said.

Stephanie readily agreed.

"I know a place we can go for some real tasty fried food," Stephanie said.

The maid was in Marliss' room, folding down white satin sheets on the queen-sized bed. Red scented candles glowed on the nightstand, reflecting on a crystal vase of scarlet long-stem roses.

"Daisy, dear, I noticed the cupboard is getting a little bare," Stephanie said. "Will you run into town and pick up a few things at the supermarket? And don't forget the canola oil. Get a big bottle. Please do it before dinner. I'm planning an antipasto salad, and we'll need the oil for that delicious Italian dressing Lewis makes."

Daisy looked up from her work, her cornflower blue eyes troubled beneath her straight-cut blond bangs.

"It's such a long drive," Daisy said. "Can't I go to the store tomorrow? I believe there is some cooking oil left."

"There's not enough, dear," Stephanie said. "Do it tonight."

The morning sun broke like an egg across the back lawn leading to the patio.

Stephanie stretched across the limestone wall of the fire pit, extending the rake to push aside the mound of leaves and twigs to create a body-shaped hollow. Shielded from the house by a stand of gnarled oak trees, the fire pit was five feet deep with a six-foot diameter, a perfect fit for Marliss, just as though somebody had it installed it with the vamp in mind. Stephanie emptied the bottle of cooking oil on the dry, shriveled brown leaves and tossed the empty container into the pit.

“Fry, baby, fry,” she murmured.

She propped the rake against a tree and saw Lewis stumbling toward her, glassy eyed. And she saw Troy’s Mercedes still parked in the driveway.

“He said he has a report to finish before he goes into town,” Lewis said. Drool trickled from a corner of his mouth. “We got to wait until tomorrow to do this.”

“Did you get rid of Daisy?”

Lewis bobbed his head. “She’s taking the Lincoln to the garage for a tune-up.”

“She’ll be gone for hours,” Stephanie said. “As soon as Troy leaves, you kill Marliss. It’s got to be done during daylight, you know.”

Lewis gulped.

The oak trees cast long shadows through the parlor windows before Troy left for Boston. The Lincoln was parked in the driveway, but Daisy had disappeared into her room.

“It’s time, Lewis,” Stephanie said. She patted the pocket of her chambray jacket, reassuring herself that she had plenty of wooden matches. She followed him up the stairway into the hall, their footsteps muted by the Oriental runner. Passing the closed door to Daisy’s room, Stephanie pressed a finger of caution across her lips. Lewis nodded, jerking his head, showering spittle on her arm. In one beefy fist, he clutched a transparent plastic bag.

Marliss lay on her side on the satin sheets, her dark lashes resting on the full curve of her cheek. A nearly empty goblet of red wine and an open bag of doggie treats lay by the vase of roses. She slept in the deep peace of a completely satisfied woman.

Lewis stood motionless over her, gazing with wonder-widened eyes at the shape of the naked body under the sheet.

“Now, Lewis,” Stephanie hissed.

With a swift motion, Lewis pulled the plastic bag over Marliss’ head, twisting the ends tightly around her neck. Marliss’ eyes popped wide, fixing on Stephanie. The suction of the intake for her scream pulled the plastic tight over her gaping mouth. Her hands grabbed for Lewis, her fingers twisting into his shirt sleeves. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and her arms slackened onto the bed. It had happened quickly. Too quickly. Marliss did not suffer enough.

Lewis let go of the bag.

“Get her!” Stephanie growled.

Panting, he heaved the limp body over his shoulder. Stephanie yanked the plastic bag off Marliss and shoved it in her pocket. As Lewis lurched down the hall, Marliss’ arms swung and her knuckles banged against the door to Daisy’s room. Stephanie whacked him on the side of his head.

Lewis trudged toward the fire pit, making a strange “Ohhhhh” sound. He dumped Marliss on the grass at the base of an oak tree. He breathed in gasps as he leaned against the trunk, his body sliding into a useless puddle. If Lewis broke now, he could spoil everything. Stephanie ordered him to go back to his room. There was a banana smoothie waiting for him, this one laced with enough barbiturates to make an elephant forget.

Stephanie stared down at Marliss. The vamp's eyes fluttered.

"Not dead, yet?" Stephanie muttered. "Great, because you haven't suffered enough."

She dragged Marliss across the grass. Grasping one leg, she dropped Marliss into the pit head first, folding one leg over the stone wall. Marliss lay in the leaves like an upside-down L. Stephanie, steadying herself on the wall, stomped down on Marliss' leg until it snapped. Then she shoved all of Marliss into the pit.

Marliss sprawled in the bottom t, her ankle at a 45 degree angle to her calf. She pushed herself on her side, her fingers grasping the stone wall, but she wasn't strong enough to pull herself out.

Stephanie raked the leaves over her. The edge of the pile quivered.

A car door slammed in the courtyard. Troy!

Stephanie's hands shook as she scratched the wooden match against the pit, and the burning match dropped on the ground. She stomped on the flame, grasped two matches, raked them into a burst of fire and tossed them onto the leaves. Smoke wisped out of the pit and amber glowed against the limestone. Stephanie pulled out all the matches, whipped the bundle against the stone, and threw the torch into the pyre. She crouched down behind an oak and peeked out.

Troy stood at the passenger side door, holding it open. Daisy stepped out. He took her in his arms, kissing her deeply. As Daisy embraced him, the sunset glittered on the diamond on her left ring finger.

Stephanie hugged herself, her jaw slack, turning her back on the sight of her husband and his lover. She stared at the ring of flames in the fire pit. A white hand reached over the stones.

*Help me.*

Were the words whispered, or was she just hearing them in her mind?

"I can't help you," Stephanie whispered. Better to be a murderess than to be caught. "You have to die."

Sunset bled red over the white hand. The skin on the back of the hand darkened. The fingers melded together, the nails thickening, blackening.

*Help me.*

Still not too late.

Stephanie shook her head.

Flames burst from the pit, billowing smoke.

The blackened hand on the rim of the pit tensed. Fur spread over the skin.

The burning leaves heaved.

Rotty bounded out of the pit, limping on three legs, one hind paw at a 45 degree angle to his leg. Yellow eyes glared at Stephanie.

The smoke rose, the edges of Rotty blurred, dissolving into a dark mass floating above Stephanie's head. Marliss hovered over her, her feet inches from Stephanie's face.

"I wanted to be your friend," Marliss said.

"Troy, somebody started a fire in the pit!" Daisy called.

Marliss coalesced into Rotty and sprang for Stephanie's throat, his long fangs severing her vocal cords. He dragged Stephanie over the limestone wall and jumped into the pit with her, shoving her under the leaves before jumping out of the pit.

"Rotty, you poor puppy!" Daisy kneeled, hugging the dog. "What happened to you? Did you get into a fight?"

"What was he doing digging in the pit?" Troy asked.

"I don't know," Daisy said. "Maybe he buried his bones in there."