



A Minor Setback

I pressed my face up against the wide *Burger Meister* window as silvery drops of rain came down in a torrent around me. The warm, yellow inside of the restaurant made such a stark contrast with the dreary, damp night behind me. So much so that, as I walked in and threw back the hood of my soaked black sweatshirt, I had to squint at the fluorescent light as I made my way to the counter. The walls were decorated with smiling paper jack-o-lanterns and ghosts, but they hardly seemed like happy smiles. I felt like they were mocking me. Since I had become a zombie things had only gone up for me, but it seemed that it only lasted as long as I kept looking forward. As soon as I turned around I instantly recognized that something very important was missing from my life.

“Hi,” I said to the guy at the register, with an uneasy smile. “Can I have a Cheese Pleaser, a small order of onion rings and a small *Grape Fizz*?”

“Do you want that for here or to go?” I froze as I thought about the answer. I always took it to go unless I was with Brittany, but I was starting to consider eating it in. I hated that, but I turned toward the large windows, watched the rain come down in buckets and realized I didn’t have anyplace else to go.

“For here, please.” I regrettably made my way to a table in the corner, next to the window, and started eating. Immediately I felt people’s eyes on me. Maybe it was just some weird paranoia, but

that was why I hated eating alone. Not *alone* alone. I loved eating alone. You get privacy, time to yourself, time to think. I just hated eating alone *in public* because then you're not just alone.

Your loneliness is showcased and your hunger is a museum exhibit. It's like a Broadway show with your mouth as the star. Chewing, sipping, chomping, swallowing and then, the grand finale; just before you wipe your greasy lips on a shredding napkin, a whole line of dancing girls comes out with sparklers. Eating alone in a fast food restaurant has got to be the most depressing experience a human being can go through. And here I am; Madame Midnight, Liz the Vixen, the most popular girl in school; eating alone in a fast food restaurant and I'm just wondering what happened to my life.

With every bite I took I was reminded of how alone I was. *Brittany doesn't want anything to do with me. Freddie doesn't even know me anymore and, so far, it doesn't seem like he wants to know me. Sophie wants to kill me. But why am I alone tonight? I've got hundreds of friends, and hundreds more who I haven't even met yet! I should be sitting here, flanked by people on all sides, regaling them with stories about how I tie my shoes in the morning and what kind of shampoo I use! They don't care what I say; they're mesmerized whenever I open my mouth! I should be surrounded by adoring fans, making fun of the people sitting across the room, sipping their shakes alone. So why am I the one who's alone? I guess it's because I don't really want to hang out with any of those people. They're boring, they're predictable and, what's more, they're not even my real friends.*

As I sat there, brooding, the bell on



the front entrance rang and Freddie and Sophie dashed in, laughing and trying to escape the rain. That's right, Freddie *and* Sophie... together. I just sank into my seat, hoping they didn't see me. *Oh, what do I care if they see me or not? I'm already trapped in the most depressing experience possible, so it can't get any worse!* I just kept eating, pulled my sopping hood back over my head, and tried my best to ignore them.

I tried to ignore the wonderful and witty remarks Freddie made about the menu and the way Sophie would laugh at his jokes as if it were the first joke she'd ever heard. I most certainly tried my best not to look at them. Unfortunately, my best wasn't good enough. *How could he even like her? She's such a punk! Although, I must admit, she does seem considerably nicer when she's around him. Maybe she's not so bad after all. Maybe she just hates me, specifically. Maybe she's just a little lonely, like me. Sure, she was always creepy, but she was never mean to me. Maybe I should just tell her who I am.*

As they were waiting for the food, Freddie casually looked around and happened to notice me staring at him. I tried to look away. I tried to tell myself, *he's just one boy against the thousands of boys who are climbing over each other to get a date with me. What's so great about Freddie?* He recognized me, even despite my somber face and pitifully matted hair, and smiled, giving me a little wave. *That's what's so great about him. He's mine and nobody else could ever take his place.* I melted like the cheese on my hamburger and returned with an uneasy wave of my own.

Shortly thereafter, the two of them left with their food and Freddie gave me another smile as he walked out the door. Sophie noticed me and smiled, too. But it wasn't the same. It was an evil, malicious smile, followed by a number of lewd gestures, bringing to my attention the fact that she had my Freddie in the palm of her hands. That was it. Now I was sure. She was not nice, she

was not lonely. She was a witch.

I gritted my teeth as she left, and dragged my angry, black fingernails across the tabletop. When I realized that I had made five deep scars in the table, I suddenly panicked and covered it with a napkin, hoping no one would notice until after I was long gone. At the height of my leeriness, I was startled by a tap on the glass next to me. I jumped when I saw Brittany's face peering in from the rainy night. Once I had regained my composure, I motioned for her to come in, but she seemed reluctant. Finally, she came stomping through the door, soaking wet.

"I just saw Freddie and Sophie together," she blurted out as she plopped down in the seat across from me, with a wet squish.

"I know. They were just in here."

"Aren't you angry? Aren't you eager for some zombie revenge?"

I looked briefly at the napkin, discretely covering the vicious scratch marks I had dug into the table and lied. "No, I'm not." I smiled and tried my very best to look cool and in-control. "I can have any guy I want. Why should I be angry if Freddie and..." I gulped. "Sophie... are hanging out with each other? Why should I even care?"

She stared at me for a while and twisted her mouth, saying, "I wish I knew how to stop liking you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I can't honestly say that I like you anymore, because I really don't. But at the same time, you *are* still my best friend and I love you. That's why it drives me nuts to hear you talk like that."

"Like what? What did I say?"

"Look me in the eye and say, with a straight face, that you don't care about Freddie anymore. Just tell me that you aren't

upset that someone like Sophie is trying to get her claws into him!”

I was silent for a while and answered, “I am not upset about it. I don’t care. I’m *not* upset.”

“Right. Just keep telling yourself that.” And I did. But I wasn’t completely lying. The truth was, it really didn’t make me upset that Sophie wanted to flirt with my old boyfriend. It just made me want to tear her beating heart out and feed it to the worms!

I decided that the only way to be in control of the situation was to keep an eye on them. So, after school the next day, I trailed them for the rest of the afternoon, just incase she tried anything cheeky. Something about Freddie spending time with that witch made me jealous, so jealous that I felt like I could trade everything I had just to know that he wasn’t going to fall for her. But he couldn’t fall for her, right?

I was leaning up against the wall of *Nothin’ but Sofas*, with a newspaper in front of my face. Ironically, I think my picture was on the front page. As they passed, I lifted it higher and pretended to read Ed Tourniquet’s column on why the spatula should be phased out. Once I was sure they were far enough away, I lowered my paper, put on my sunglasses and followed them. They went to the music store, *Tons O’ Tunes*, stopped off at the library (as if Sophie cares about anything in there) Then they made their way down Main Street to look for a place to eat.

I took this opportunity to disappear, throw on my costume, and let my alter ego take over. I went along the rooftops, always keeping the two lovebirds in my sights. They had stopped at the corner store for some snacks and were making their way to... *Don Esposito’s? But that’s our place!* I had to get across the street fast, but it was way too far to jump. Besides, I had a much more entertaining idea. I dashed to the other end of the roof, where a streetlight rose

up from the sidewalk. There was another on the other side; the perfect way to get across the street and show off at the same time. I took a running start and leaped off the edge of the roof, gripping the arm of the streetlight, swinging a few times and flipping across to the opposite light. I spun around on that one a few times and launched myself up to the pizzeria roof.

I don't know if anyone saw me, but I hoped someone did. I don't know how they could've missed me, wearing all black in the middle of the day. It wasn't my aim to hide. Not anymore. I climbed down the front of the building, upside-down, and looked inside, scanning the restaurant for them. *There they are, sitting in... our booth!* I put my ear up to the glass and listened.

"You know, Sophie," Freddie said, hardly even looking at her. "I guess I never thought of it that way before. It's been very... weird since my girlfriend died. I wasn't sure I was ever going to go back to feeling normal again."

"How awful," she responded, nibbling the end of her slice of pizza. The way she did it made her look like a gentle little rabbit and watching it just made me angrier.

"Charlotte was the only girl I ever really felt comfortable being around," he continued, without even having taken a bite of his meal. "She was just so... real and so warm."

"You know," Sophie said, extending her arm across the table. "I can't replace her... but I can at least try to *fill* in for her a bit..."

"Uhhhh..." He looked down at her hand, but didn't take it. It was clear to me that he was still very uncomfortable about this whole thing, and that he wasn't falling for her. I was so relieved I remember consciously sighing. A total cliché, I know, but it was appropriate for this moment. My Freddie still loved me and wasn't about to betray my memory. From that point on, I felt, I could sleep soundly.

But I figured one can never be too careful so, just to be sure this miserable romance never got off the ground, I flipped downward and kicked right through the window. Everyone was seized with shock as I came crashing through the glass and landed on the tiled floor with a crunch. I fixed my gaze on Sophie and shouted, “Get your hands off of my man, you hussy!”

She scanned me with a ridiculous look and asked, “Just who in the bloody ‘ell are you?”

“It’s Madame Midnight,” Freddie exclaimed in wonder. I never got tired of that.

“Madame Midnight?” She couldn’t even say it with a straight face. “Aren’t you out a little early, Missy?”

“Well, yes. Yes I am.” I hadn’t been prepared for this. “What time is it, anyway?”

“3:25,” Freddie said, looking down at his watch. “No, wait! 3:26.”

“Okay, then,” I continued. “For the time being I’m Madame 3:26.” There were many things I hoped to inspire in my enemies; terror, woe... but not confusion. “Look, the point is I want you to back off of that young man right now.”

Sophie started laughing. “And what makes you think you have a claim on him?” She smiled slyly and looked at Freddie, who apparently didn’t like being the center of attention.

“That’s none of your business,” I yelled, stomping on a piece of glass. “Just get lost before I lay one on you!”

“Oh, God,” she shouted in the middle of a cackle. “You’re not gonna kiss me, are...” I kicked her into a table before she could finish.

Freddie looked up at me in horror and said, “What do you want with me? Why did you do that?”

“Because she’s a witch, Freddie! I know she seems nice but she’s definitely not the kind of girl you want to...” She came up

from behind and grabbed me by the throat, so I spun around and threw her off. At this point her eyes were practically popping from her head out of pure rage.

“Do you really think he would want to hang out with a criminal like you,” she shouted in spite.

“At least I’m not a frog-licking broom jockey,” I retorted.

“Please, girls,” Freddie said, standing up. “Don’t fight over me! I’m sure the three of us can sit down nicely and have some pizza...”

We both turned and shouted, “STAY OUT OF THIS!” So Freddie sat down with nothing to do but eat his pizza and watch us go at it.

Sophie tried to scratch me with her razor-sharp nails, but I grabbed her arm and flipped out of her way. “You think you’re a match for me, girl,” she taunted.

Until now I had very little experience fighting. None, in fact. As such, I also had very little experience with fight talk. “Bring it on,” I shouted, thinking it was what fighting-type people said.

“Fine,” she hissed. She brought it on... it hurt. Lightning bolts leapt from her fingers and threw me into a wall. Yeah. Lightning bolts. At this point, everybody in the building realized this was more than an aggravated catfight and was rather something more akin to guerrilla warfare, and evacuated as fast as their little legs could carry them. The only one who stayed behind was Freddie, who was too dumbfounded to move. Or maybe he was just dumb. I don’t know. I loved him anyway.

I was on my back and completely vulnerable. It seemed my super-human strength couldn’t make up for my total lack of experience. Sophie gritted her teeth and strode in front of me with her clawed fingers outstretched like polished, green talons. She looked like a vulture preparing to catch her prey. “You know, Princess, I think a lot of people would be very interested in

finding out who you are behind that little mask of yours. I'm sure Freddie's curious, and I wouldn't mind knowing either. I think I already have... an... idea..."

She bent down to the floor where I was crumpled and reached for my mask, but before she could touch it, I leaned backward and kicked her as hard as I could, sending her flying out the broken window with a shriek. "Over my dead body," I shouted after her. *Yeah. I think that sounded good.* I turned to Freddie with a smile and said, "Some girls, huh?" He didn't reply. He just stared at me with his mouth open. "Are you okay," I asked.

"I guess so," he finally responded, having shaken off his stupor. "Who are you anyway?"

"... Just a friend." He looked into my face very carefully, trying to cut through my disguise. Maybe I'm selling domino masks short, but I thought anyone who was fooled by one must've been pretty stupid. And yet, it seemed like the truth was starting to reflect itself in his eyes. I think I wanted him to know.

"Who," he repeated. Okay, I guess the domino mask worked well enough.

"Gotta go," I said. Before he had any more time to exploit the flaws in my lousy eye mask, I spun around and somersaulted out the window. He was following me, but I knew I could lose him. The real question on my mind was, did I *want* to lose him? *No.* I stopped in the middle of the street and turned toward him. "Freddie, I have... I have something to tell you..."

He looked eager to hear it, but suddenly his face became twisted in shock and shouted, "Midnight! Behind you!" Before I could even turn I felt something hit me, so hard it knocked me clean to the ground and left cracks in the pavement. Slowly, I rose to see if I could get the license plate number of the truck that hit me, but there was no truck. It was worse than that. Sophie was standing on a rooftop across the street, laughing; cackling, really.

I was a little puzzled. “Sophie? How did you get all the way up there?”

“Oh, it’s a simple enough task for a *broom jockey*...” She whistled and a broom came sailing right into her hand. It was sleek and black, and had a metal blade bolted into the top of the handle.

“Uh oh...” She jumped onto the broom and dove at me like a hawk, nearly clipping me with the blade, and spun up into the air, laughing.

“You know, Dear,” she said in an arrogant, condescending voice. “You should have known better than to anger a witch.”

Okay, Charlotte, here’s your chance to just apologize to her and work things out amicably, I thought. But I guess that wasn’t fun because what I said was, “And you’ll learn soon enough that this town belongs to Madame Midnight!” Did I even know how lame that sounded? No. I guess I was too busy making a fool of myself to realize.

Obviously enraged by my sheer gall, Sophie came down for another pass, her broom whistling as it cut against the autumn wind. I stepped aside and tried to punch her, but I missed. I needed to get to higher ground or this was going to be the shortest fight in history. I scrambled up to a rooftop so I could get a better shot at her. She hovered in the air above the street, her dark pixie hair and long leather coat twitching in the wind.

She was way too far from any solid ground for me to reach her, but she seemed to be able to get at *me* just fine. I don’t know what those green things she was throwing at me were, but they were glowing, and they made loud boom noises when they hit things. That was enough to know I should avoid getting hit by any. I kept moving, jumping from roof to roof, swinging on lampposts and leaping over railings; anything to keep her from hitting me. Occasionally, she would make signals with her hands

and a sudden wind would pick up, nearly ripping me from where I stood.

“Don’t fight like a coward,” I shouted, from the roof of *Don Esposito’s* gripping a smokestack to steady myself against her magical gusts. “Get down and fight like a real woman!”

“A real woman *wins* the fight she starts,” she answered imperiously. “I guess it’s too late for you, then, Princess.”

I suddenly felt a wave of fury overtake me; one I couldn’t just shrug off any longer. “Don’t. Call. Me. *Princess!*” I ran, at full speed, toward the edge of the roof and leapt at her like a cat. I knew that she could shift to the side at any moment and I would fall thirty feet to the pavement, probably landing on my face. I didn’t care. It was now or never, so I went for it. As it turned out, she was too shocked by my boldness to move and I grabbed her by the end of her coat.

The broom started going haywire and she shouted, “You stupid twit! You’re gonna kill us both!” I moved my grip from her coat the back of the broom and summoned all of my strength to climb up behind her. Now, despite everything that I’ve said, I was not thrilled by heights. Not that I was scared, exactly, but I wasn’t looking forward to falling.

Nervous, I grabbed at anything I could get my fingers around, and they just happened to find their way around Sophie’s necklace. I lost my footing a little and fell back, with only the chain around her neck keeping me on the broomstick. I heard her gargling and sputtering and saw her face turn red as she flailed her arms while still trying to grip the broom.

“Sorry,” I said, trying to figure out how to let go without falling. With a gristly moan, she made a sign with her fingers and a blinding flash erupted in my face. My vision went stark white and I felt myself tumble off the broomstick and hit the ground. Since I no longer had to breathe, I had no wind to get knocked out of



me, but it hurt just the same.

Heralded by a triumphant series of snaps and cracks,

I rose to my feet and stretched. I

turned around

and saw, for the first

time, how much damage she was causing to Main Street.

Brick walls were smashed in

and there were cracks and potholes all

over the road.

Naturally, I blamed her. “Stop, Sophie! Are you nuts? You’re gonna destroy the whole town!” I never even stopped to think I might have shared the blame.

“Shut up,” she spat, nursing her sore throat. “I’ll do whatever I bloody want!” A fireball came sailing down to me. I knocked it aside, but three more followed soon after and struck me to the ground, face down. I was about to rise, when I saw my mask on the ground.

At first I thought, *Who cares? They’ll all find out soon enough.* But seeing how much damage had been caused by our scuffle, I decided it would be best to avoid any complications. People might think it was partially my fault. I reached for the mask, but a blast hit the street right there and I pulled back. I couldn’t let anyone see me without it. Not in a situation like this. I rolled forward and snatched it up, slapping on my face, probably upside-down. I looked up and watched Sophie struggle in the air with her spooky, magical floor-sweeper. She had only just regained control of it and aimed the front at me like an arrow. Normally, I wouldn’t be afraid of a broom, but that blade was awfully sharp.

With a maniacal cackle she nosed it downward and made a straight shot for me. I knew she was expecting me to jump aside, so I didn't. I just stood there and got ready for my opening. The closer she came the faster she flew, like a kamikaze fighter. I knew she was determined to skewer me, and I also knew that she was very likely to do so, so I didn't fight it. I just hoped my indestructibility covered impalement, because as I felt the point of the blade go through my stomach, I grabbed the broomstick as tightly as I could and spun around, shaking Sophie from the stick and sent her crashing into a line of garbage cans.

I stood, triumphant, over her, with the broom sticking out of both ends of my body, and said, "Kiss that, *Princess!*" With a fast chop, I broke the back end off of the stick and pulled the other side out of my back. The wound sealed up and disappeared in moments and, best of all, I didn't feel a thing. Although, she did make a big hole in my only costume.

"What the blinkin' 'ell are you," she asked, peering hazily up from where she sat, with a banana peel in her hair.

"I'm Madame Midnight, and this is *my* town!" I turned to Freddie, who was still awestruck. "And that's my man!" I blew him a kiss and disappeared, you know, like the shadows.

"Don't think this is over, Madame Midnight! Not by a long shot! God, I hate it 'ere."