Chapter 1

The Door’s Riders on the Storm was playing on the car radio and for a few blessed seconds Jim closed his eyes and let the music roll over him.

How long had it been since he heard that song, or even The Doors, for that matter? Years. Probably the last time was before he got infected. Since hooking up with Carol the two of them would usually have on a 90s alternative rock station—that was the kind of music she liked; her favorite groups Nirvana, Nine Inch Nails, Smashing Pumpkins, Sonic Youth, and if she couldn’t find one of those stations, she’d either tune in a hip hop station or plug in one of her Kurt Cobain CDs, sometimes Green Day. It didn’t much matter to him. He put her through enough as it was, and if she could find some comfort and peace of mind from her music he was all for it.

With his eyes still closed, the line about a killer on the road brought a sick smile to his lips. Was his own brain squirming like a toad? It sure as hell felt like it. It had been a rough day so far. He had stretched things out and had gone too long between feedings, and now it hurt so bad he could barely sit still. The bright sunlight didn’t help; it made him feel like he was on fire, even with his dark shades and baseball cap pulled down to his eyes. He tugged at the cap, trying to pull it down still further, and sunk lower in his seat, drenched in sweat. It surprised him that he still had any fluids left in his body. He sensed Carol looking at him. She looked so deep in thought, her concern about his condition wrecking her face. He tried smiling at her. She moved one of her hands to grip his and gave him a squeeze.

“I never should’ve let you wait this long,” she said.
“I’ll be okay.”
It hurt just talking, his voice soft and hollow and rattling emptily in his throat; the sound
of a saw pulled loosely over metal.
She shook her head, the skin tight around her mouth, her jaw pushed forward.
“I shouldn’t have let you do this,” she said. “Look at you. You’re so sick you can barely
sit up.”
He cleared his throat, and again told her that he’d be fine.
“You’re going to feed tonight,” she said. “I’m not letting you push this out another day.”
There was nothing but strength and determination in her voice. He didn’t argue with her.
He knew it wasn’t safe to wait any longer. Already he could feel himself slipping into this
crazed state of consciousness, part hallucinations and part animal fury. It would only last for a
few seconds, but he had a sense it was going to get worse if he didn’t feed soon, and God knows
who he might feed on if he lost control altogether.
Carol let go of his hand to get a better grip on the wheel. It constantly amazed him that she
loved him as much as she did. How could someone as wonderful as her love a monster like him?
There was no mistaking that that’s what he was, at least what he had become since his infection.
Before the infection he was a good-looking guy; six-foot, 190 pounds, dark complexion,
muscular, a hardness about him from his time in the Army, along with a constant five-o’clock
shadow. The infection dramatically changed his physical appearance. Zero body fat and his
muscles lengthening and becoming tough and sinewy. It also lightened his complexion, his hair
now white, and his skin becoming smooth with no beard or mustache to worry about. His weight
had dropped significantly also, now at 140, and his body becoming lean, cat-like; even his head
had changed shape, becoming angular, kind of like the elves in the Lord of the Rings movie. His
teeth didn’t change, though, he didn’t develop fangs, but he was still a monster—what else
would you call a creature that looked mostly human but needed to subsist on human blood?
The Doors Riders on the Storm ended, and the next song up was The Stones Sympathy For
The Devil. The timing of that made him laugh weakly, his insides hurting like hell as his body
shook. Sympathy for the devil, huh? How about any sympathy for him, not that he deserved any,
least not with what he has had to do to survive. If he hadn’t met Carol, he probably would’ve
found a way to end his life—not that it would’ve been easy with what the virus had done to him,
leaving his muscles and tendons as hard as steel and his skin close to bulletproof, and causing
this weird kind of super immunity where his vital organs would regenerate on injury.
Before meeting Carol he had thought long and hard about what he would have to do to kill
himself if it ended up that way. Explosives, maybe, but then again they could just blow off his
limbs and leave him still alive. A guillotine with a sharp enough blade might do the trick; or if
he cut himself open and pulled out his heart and made sure no tissue was left behind to
regenerate into a new one. Those had seemed like his best bets. Later, days before meeting
Carol, he learned first-hand that shoving a hand grenade down a vampire’s throat did the job just
fine, but that was something discovered on the spur of the moment. Since Carol, he had put
those thoughts out of his head and accepted that he would spend his life traveling aimlessly from
city to city feeding when he had to. Nothing else was possible anymore. He cared too deeply for
Carol to leave her, especially knowing what it would do to her.
A few final wheezes of laughter shook him, then with his teeth clattering he hugged
himself tightly trying to shrink his body from any exposure to the sun. Thin lines showed along
the edges of Carol’s mouth as her concern for him deepened. She reached over and caressed his
neck.
“I hate seeing you like this,” she said.
“I know. But I’ll be okay.”
“I don’t think you’re going to be able to wait until tonight.”
“I’ll be able to.”
She paused for a moment, her eyes growing dim as she stared off into the distance.
“You can feed off of me,” she said, her voice barely above the engine whine of their ’88
Chevy Nova.
“Please, don’t bring this up again.”
She bit her lip, tried to smile.
“I want you to,” she said. “We should go through this together.”
“It’s not going to happen. So stop it, please.”

Jim’s hand shook as he reached over to turn the volume higher on the car radio and at the same time end the discussion. Carol’s cheeks puffed up, obviously frustrated, but she took the hint and dropped the subject. The station played a set of Leonard Cohen songs, and after Hallelujah ended, Carol turned off the radio. They rode in silence for a few minutes before she mentioned that she liked those songs and asked who the artist was. Jim told her the name of the musician.

“We’ll have to find some of his CDs,” she said. “Very cool voice. Even though it sounds like he’s got something stuck in his throat. And those lyrics, wow. It sent a chill down my spine.”

Yeah, I’ve been a fan for a long time. Him and Dylan are the two best songwriters of the last forty years. It’s good to see the old dude get rediscovered.

Carol made a face. She wasn’t a fan of Bob Dylan, which always mystified him. He couldn’t imagine anyone not being a fan. They drove in silence for another few minutes, the lines along Carol’s mouth deepening as her eyes shifted sideways and she caught a glimpse of him. Jim could only imagine what he looked like sitting there pale and shivering, his clothing soaked through with perspiration.

“Will you be okay if I stop someplace to eat?”

“Sure.”

“I wouldn’t be asking except I think I might pass out if I don’t get some food.” She gave him a sad smile. “Unlike you I can’t put off eating for twelve days.”

“Well, it’s not as if I ever really eat anyways…”

“You know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean,” Jim said. They’d been on the road six hours since having left Springfield, Illinois at the crack of dawn. Carol didn’t understand why they had to drive to Cleveland, why he couldn’t feed there, but Jim wasn’t having any luck finding what he was looking for in Springfield. Chicago, while closer, was out. He had already fed there too many times as it was, and had to be careful about drawing suspicion to what he was doing. Cleveland would have what he needed. “First place we see we stop at. You need a break, lady,” Jim added.

She nodded, smiling thinly. A few miles down the road they spotted a roadside diner and she pulled into the parking lot. Jim was shaking badly as he hobbled from the car to the diner’s entrance, his vision blurred, his feet unsteady. Carol moved quickly to his side so he could lean against her. Outside of a blonde heavyset cashier chewing gum and a middle-aged waitress with a Led Zeppelin logo tattooed on her neck, there were maybe ten other people scattered along the counter and in booths. All eyes turned to Carol and Jim as they walked in. The cashier stared at them and popped her gum.

“Miss, is your boyfriend sick?” she asked.

“It’s nothing contagious,” Carol muttered, annoyed.

“I don’t know about that, Honey.” The cashier hesitated as she looked Jim over more carefully. “To me he looks like he’s got something pretty bad. Maybe it would be best if he don’t come in here. It wouldn’t be fair bringing him into a public restaurant, not with all the other folks we’ve got eating here now. Honey, they shouldn’t have to worry about catching what he’s got.”

“I’m standing right here,” Jim said in a soft whisper. “It’s not as if I can’t hear everything you’re saying.”

The cashier continued to ignore him while offering Carol a false sympathetic smile.

“Why don’t you have him wait in your car while you order some takeout. How would that be, Honey?”

Carol’s face darkened. “I think instead we’ll just sit at that booth over there away from everyone. How would that be, Honey?”

She led Jim as she took a step forward. The cashier moved quickly to block them. The waitress moved also and looked like she was ready for a brawl, her hands planted firmly on her hips to show off large forearms. A couple of truck drivers at the counter stood up and also took an uneasy step towards them.

“Miss, why don’t you just make this easy for everyone. You don’t want the police being called, do you?”
Jim could sense the violence growing in Carol. Her hands were clenched at her side, thin veins revealing themselves along her neck. In another few seconds she’d be flying at this woman who outweighed her by a good eighty pounds. That was the thing with Carol, she was as fiercely protective and loyal as they came. Even though she was five foot one and maybe ninety-five pounds when soaking wet, she’d go at them like a hellcat. Using what little strength he had left, he pulled her away and forced her through the entrance door and outside.

“Don’t,” he pleaded.

“Fuck them. Who the fuck are they to tell you you can’t go in there?”

“Babe, it’s not worth it. I’m going back to the car. You go in there and get something to eat, okay?”

She was too furious to talk at first. Sputtering, she forced out, “How about I just throw a brick through their front window!”

“Babe…”

“Or better yet, how about you slaughtering all those fucking assholes in there! While you’re doing that I could cook myself something on their grill, and we could both be eating together.”

“Babe…”

“Why not?”

“Come on. Be serious. I’m not going to do that.”

She was steaming, her dark eyes hot and angry. “That fat cow bitch. She’d deserve to have you rip her throat out. She probably thinks you have AIDS. The bitch.”

Jim smiled thinly. “Maybe she thinks I have the bubonic plague. It doesn’t matter. You go back in there and get yourself something to eat. I’ll wait.”

“Fuck them. We’ll find another place.”

She stumbled, dizzy, her eyes losing focus. This time Jim helped her steady herself. Hesitantly, she brought a hand up to her temple.

Jim gave her a patient smile. “Any place we go is going to be the same. You need to eat. I’ll be fine.”

Carol looked like she wanted to argue, but she also looked hungry and very pale. She suffered from hypoglycemia and her stumbling and dizziness were a clear sign she needed food badly. Jim thought he could hear her heart palpitating. She didn’t have time to start searching for another place to eat—there was no arguing that, so she relented, first walking him back to the car to make sure he made it okay, then heading back to the diner. Jim closed his eyes. Lowering his forehead into his hands, he felt the cold clamminess of his skin. Even though it seemed to him like he was burning up, his skin was so damn cold to the touch—like he was a month-old corpse. His skin always felt that way. He wondered how Carol stood it.

God he hurt.

God he was hungry.

To focus his thoughts away from the pain, he tried to hold Carol’s image in his mind. She was so damn beautiful. Long black hair that fell past her shoulders, her small heart-shaped face dominated by the most expressive dark brown eyes he’d ever seen. Those eyes could fill up so intensely with emotion, and when she’d look at him a certain way he’d get weak enough in the knees that they would start to buckle.

God she was beautiful…

She was only nineteen when they met. Three years later she looked so much older than she should’ve. World weary. That was the thought that came to mind. There was a tragic quality to her beauty now; her face more gaunt than it should be, thin strands of white occasionally showing up in her dark black hair. She’d pull them out when she’d see them—not out of vanity, but simply trying to keep him from noticing; afraid that if he knew how much he was aging her he might leave her. He couldn’t leave her, though. As much as he needed human blood to survive, he needed her presence even more. She was more addictive than any drug. He needed his daily fix of her—he needed to feel her small warm body against his at night, the side of her face resting against his shoulder and her thin legs draped over his body. The virus had left him with a highly acute sense of hearing and he needed to hear the soft pattering of her heart. He didn’t think he could stay sane without it. For her sake, he would risk it except he knew that she held the same addiction to him; that it would be just as soul crushing for her if they separated.
For better or worse, they were each other’s soul mates, and as much as he wanted a better life for her he couldn’t inflict that kind of pain on her by leaving, not unless he thought she could survive and be okay some day. Somehow he knew she wouldn’t. That turned out to be the most damning curse of his infection.

His thoughts drifted to when they met. It was right after all that bizarre shit with Serena. He had somehow gotten out of New York in one piece and was trolling the mean streets of Newark half-crazed from hunger when he heard Carol screaming for help. She was two blocks away and had been dragged beneath an underpass bridge by a leather and chain jacketed, tattoo-encrusted street thug. The thug was more than twice Carol’s size and held a dirty rag against her face which mostly muffled her screams. Still, she fought like hell while he tried to bend her over and rip off her panties, her skirt already having been thrown to the ground. In a few heartbeats Jim was there, pulling the thug away from Carol, and at the same time yelling at her to get away from them. She collected her torn skirt but she didn’t run away, and Jim understood why she stayed there and watched. Even in the crazed, wild state he was in, he felt the connection with her when their eyes met. He had the same immediate longing for her as she did for him.

But he needed to feed.

The thug looked confused that someone as thin as Jim could lift him with one hand so effortlessly off the ground, especially since he outweighed Jim by a good sixty pounds. Up close the thug was ugly as sin; pockmarked, bald—and for a short moment before he had edged his switchblade out of his pants pocket—as scared-looking as any little kid had ever been.

Once the blade was open and the moonlight reflected off of it that changed and the thug transformed back to the brutish animal he was. Jim was grateful for that. It made it easier for him to do what he had to. He didn’t give him a chance to use the knife; instead he crushed every bone in the thug’s hand and sent the blade falling harmlessly to the ground—not that the thug would’ve been able to do much with it anyway. After that the skull was next.

While the thug lay as a lump of dead meat on the ground, Jim ripped open his throat and drank until the buzzing in his mind died down. He was ashamed doing this in front of this beautiful dark-haired girl but he couldn’t help it. He desperately needed to feed. So while she stood and watched, he submerged himself in gore. He felt Carol standing behind him, could feel a moist heat coming off her body. They were like that for minutes until she touched him on the shoulder. When he turned and looked into her eyes he knew he was lost—he knew they both were...

A dog’s high-pitched whining knocked him out of his thoughts. A pickup truck had pulled up next to him and a Rottweiler inside the cab was going nuts, its paws scraping against the passenger-side window in a frantic attempt to break itself free. The owner, a big beefy guy with a buzz cut and goatee, looked like he had his hands full trying to subdue his dog. He yelled out orders for the animal to heel, all of which the Rottweiler ignored. After some struggling he got the dog on a leash. When he opened the passenger door, the dog shot out as if from a cannon and nearly dragged the owner onto the pavement. Cursing, he righted himself and, as his eyes met Jim’s, he shot Jim a pissed-off look as if he were blaming Jim for his dog’s bad behavior. Sonofabitch, the guy was perceptive, because it wasn’t as irrational as one would think. Jim knew that the dog’s reaction had nothing to do with fear but an odor that fell within the spectrum a dog could pick up but humans couldn’t. As best he could figure out, the virus caused a change in his body chemistry that resulted in the emission of an odor that affected dogs, along with a host of other animals and insects, the same way that mustard gas affected humans. They couldn’t help themselves with the way they reacted to it—they’d do anything to try and escape it.

Jim watched as the Rottweiler strained on its leash and pulled the owner away. The man looked like he wanted to tie his dog up outside the diner, but after some more struggling he gave up and let the dog go inside with him. Before the door closed behind him, the man turned and shot Jim one last enraged look.

The incident made him think of his old dog, Buster, a beautiful almost pure white Bull Terrier with only a few black smudges on his ears and some pink on the tip of his nose. That breed is so damn loyal, and as long as they have physical contact with you they’re content. Before joining the army he gave the dog to his sister, April. He often thought about Buster, wondering if he could still be alive, and if he were, whether he’d recognize him. In his mind’s
eye he could imagine Buster whining in agony but still crawling over to him so that he could lay against his feet. Thinking about Buster reminded him of his previous life. It seemed so long ago now. A different lifetime ago. To think at one time he had been a human being...

The noise of a door slamming shut distracted him. Carol had left the diner, her face a hard white, a bag clutched tightly in her fist. She tried to smile when she saw Jim, but it didn’t stick. She stormed her way to their car and banged the door open, then slid into the driver’s seat.

“Those assholes. It’s okay for them to let some flea-bitten mutt walk in there without any argument, but you they treat worse than a dog. I want to find a payphone. I’m going to call the Department of Health and see those assholes shut down!”

“Babe, it’s not worth it.”

“You should’ve seen the way that dog was wheezing and drooling at the mouth. That’s okay with them. But with you, a little sweat… Goddamn it! I really want to report them! You know what that bitch cashier had the fucking nerve to tell me? That it’s customary to leave a tip for takeout food. I wanted to shove the change down her throat!”

“Babe…”

“I’m so angry right now.”

Massive understatement…

Her lips curled up and nearly disappeared as she smiled a bare-fanged smile. Straight but slightly yellowed teeth showed through it. Shaking her head, she pulled a cheeseburger from the paper bag, unwrapped it and took an angry bite out of the burger.

“You’re not going to enjoy your food if you eat angry like this.”

“I’m not going to enjoy this greasy shit no matter how I eat it.” She took a hesitant look at Jim and apologized. “I’m sorry. God, I know with the way you’re feeling you don’t need me to act this way. I just can’t help it. I hate that they think they can treat you like this.”

“I know.”

She turned to give the diner one last angry stare. “Fuck them. Let’s just get away from this dump. The quicker we find a motel, the quicker you can lie down.”

She handed Jim the rest of her food to hold, then with the cheeseburger in one hand and gripping the steering wheel in the other, she put the car in reverse, hit the gas, and nearly spun out backing out. Sending up a cloud of dust, she shoved the car in drive, spun the wheels some more and, with her foot heavy on the gas, sped out of the parking lot and back onto 90 East nearly sideswiping a minivan. Fortunately the driver was too startled to honk or give her the finger.

“Are you okay?” Jim asked.

“Yeah, I just need a minute.” She hesitated for a moment, then asked how he was feeling.

“Better.”

She accepted the lie, but gave him a long uneasy glance as she took a bite of her burger.

“We’ll find a motel soon,” she said.

Jim nodded. He dug out of the paper bag a container of French Fries so she could eat them while wolfing down the burger. He knew she liked ketchup on her fries. He took a couple of packets, struggled for a bit, but got them open, and spread the ketchup on the fries. When she was done with the food, he handed her a chocolate shake. At least she’d have to take her time drinking that. Maybe she’d even end up tasting it. Jim turned the radio back on and found a hip hop station. She started to argue that he should find a classic rock and roll station for himself, but he told her this was what he wanted to listen to. She didn’t put up too much of a fight. She needed something to take the edge off her anger and listening to her music usually did the trick. He closed his eyes and tried to keep her from seeing how much he was hurting.

It was an hour later that she drove past the airport and then a row of strip clubs before pulling into the parking lot of a cheap motor lodge inside the Brook Park area of Cleveland. A sign out front advertised king-sized waterbeds, but other than that the motor lodge seemed typical for where they’d been staying since going on the run. Two stories, and mostly a grim dirty-looking concrete eyesore. The type of place that usually had shag carpeting from the seventies and a few mass-produced uninspired water colors hung on the walls. It was also the type of place where the furniture was bolted down, and more likely than not, had a bedspread growing more germ cultures on it than a lab full of Petri dishes—and if you were smart you didn’t lie down on it; if you were even smarter you’d cover your hand with something when you...
removed it from the bed. Also you’d keep your shoes on at night so you wouldn’t step on any
needles left behind by one of the previous occupants. Carol sighed as she looked at the building.
She gave Jim’s hand a quick squeeze, then left the car so she could rent them a room. When she
got to the front office door, she turned to give him a wistful smile before disappearing inside.
Five minutes later she came out of the office with key in hand.

“Forty-nine dollars a night for this rattrap,” she told Jim when she got back to the car.
“Sounds like a bargain.”

“Yeah, I just hope it’s not infested with bedbugs.”

Jim couldn’t help smiling. While there was a resurgence of bedbugs going on nationwide,
and while this motor lodge seemed like a prime candidate to find an infestation, this was
something they didn’t have to worry about. The only positive he could see about his infection
was that blood-seeking insects like mosquitoes, bedbugs and lice reacted to his scent the same as
dogs. If this dump did have bedbugs, they’d scatter as soon as he entered the room. Fuck, if he
could only advertise he’d make a fortune clearing pests from motels and residences.

Carol brought him back to reality by mentioning how they were running low on cash.

“We’ll get some more soon.”

“We’d better. Three nights here and we’re broke.”

Jim nodded, then moved slowly as he pulled himself out of the car. Carol looked on, her
hard smile turning fragile. She grabbed a suitcase—they’d been traveling light with only a
couple of changes of clothing each—and walked slowly to keep pace with him so she’d be able
to reach out to him in case he stumbled. She had gotten them a room on the first floor knowing
he’d have trouble now with the stairs. The room did have a king-sized waterbed, but other than
that it was as Jim expected; dirty, dingy, the walls concrete cinderblock, the ceiling water-
stained and the furniture looking like it had been picked out of the city dump. It also had the
unmistakable musty smell of a gym locker-room. Jim made it to a cheap padded wooden chair,
dragged it away from the window and collapsed in it. Carol moved quickly to close the blinds.
The room darkened enough to where Jim no longer felt like a fire was raging under his skin. He
breathed a little easier, but now more than anything it was his hunger overwhelming him.

Carol pulled the bedspread off and kicked it away into a corner, then opened the suitcase
and removed a small medical kit from her nursing school days. From inside of it she took out a
rubber hose and a syringe. She wrapped the hose tightly around her upper arm, then walked over
to Jim and sat in his lap while he pulled the hose even tighter and tied it. She walked back to her
medical kit, sat down on the bed and flicked on her arm until she could spot a vein. She had such
thin arms, and it was hard for her to locate a good vein. Once she had one, she pushed in the
syringe and took a blood sample, her face a complete blank as she did this. Jim kept his eyes
squeezed shut. He couldn’t risk seeing blood now, not in the state he was in. He heard her
remove the plastic vial from within the syringe, then the rush of blood filling up a second vial as
she took another blood sample. After a minute or so, he could hear the hose being untied, and
then the door opening and closing. He was ashamed of the fact that he was salivating.

When Carol returned, she brought an ice bucket with her. On the bottom of the bucket
covered with ice were her two blood samples. He’d have to wait until later to drink them—while
there was far less than a pint of blood in those two samples, it would still revitalize him enough
to give him the strength for what he needed to do. If he drank it now, though, it would make him
want to keep feeding until he was satiated. It would be too dangerous. Carol knew this also. She
placed the ice bucket in a drawer so it would be out of sight. Then she helped him out of the
chair and onto the bed. While he lay flat on his back, she sidled up next to him and rested her
cheek on his stomach and took hold of his arm so she could wrap it around her shoulders.

They lay together like that for several minutes before she spoke.

“Try and get some sleep, Darling,” she whispered. “In a few hours it will be dark. You’ll
be able to feed then.”

He nodded, his chin moving up and down a fraction of an inch.

“It’s too bad you can’t feed on infected blood,” she said, sighing softly. “Otherwise you
could just infect me and we could feed off of each other forever. How would that be?”

Again, he nodded because there was no harm in doing so. The virus changed a person’s
blood chemistry, making drinking it intolerable to an infected vampire. Early on in his infection
while in a half-dream-like state and without any real conscious awareness—only his hunger
driving him—he had tried feeding on Serena. Only a bare taste of her blood left him as sick as a
dog. Serena got a kick out of it, then explained the ropes to him while his body was wracked
with dry heaves. It didn’t matter, though. Even if he could consume infected blood, he’d rather
cut out his own heart than infect Carol.
Carol moved her hand lightly over Jim’s chest, trying to soothe him. “Sleep, my darling,”
she whispered. “Just a few more hours…”

Chapter 2

When Metcalf left the modest three-bedroom ranch-style house he was decked out in a
lightweight trench coat, Indiana Jones-style felt hat complete with rattlesnake-skin band, dark
shades, chinos and racing gloves—all of which he needed to protect himself against the
oppressive Southern California sun. Like every other infected vampire, his body had gone
through radical changes since his infection—losing all body fat and becoming leaner, narrower,
his face more angular, but even with these changes he was still massive. Six and a half feet tall
and two hundred and twenty pounds of muscle and tendon. A thick scar ran from his right eye to
his chin, and stood out against the paleness of his skin. His shades hid the same dead pale blue
eyes that he had since birth.

He moved quickly across the field that separated the house from an equally modest
looking barn, his head turned down as if he were racing against hurricane gales even through the
air was dead still. Although he was covered head to toe, the damn sunlight still made him
nauseous.

The inside of the barn held a tractor, some standard farming tools and bales of hay. On the
other side of the barn were the stables holding four beautiful golden Palominos. While the
altered blood chemistry of a vampire secreted an odor that was noxious to most animals,
especially dogs, horses didn’t seem to have a problem with it. Metcalf loved grooming and
riding his horses. It probably seemed crazy for an infected vampire to move to Southern
California and the intense sun, but for Metcalf, once he decided to split from Serena and open up
operations on the West Coast, the spot proved ideal. He had access to all the transients and other
such disposable people that he needed and the farm was situated in an isolated rural area seventy
miles outside of Los Angeles giving him total privacy. He could still get into the city at night for
the music scene or to the beach for surfing. And he had all the space he needed for riding his
horses.

Metcalf took off his shades. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness he walked to the back
of the barn where he crouched so he could fit his fingers between the wall and concrete flooring.
Straining, he lifted up a twelve-hundred pound slab of concrete flooring that exposed a well-lit
staircase. The concrete slab had been reinforced throughout with steel to keep it from breaking
apart. None of the other infected vampires at the compound had the strength to lift the slab
which was the way Metcalf wanted it. He held up the flooring until he could get onto the
staircase, then he lowered the concrete behind him with one hand.

The staircase led thirty feet below ground level to an eighteen thousand square foot
compound that had been separated into four areas: the “cattle” pens, a research lab, Metcalf’s
own private lab and living quarters for the fifteen vampires who were housed there. The cost to
build the compound came to over six million dollars, but money was not an issue, not with the
amounts that Serena was able to get her hands on. The owner of the construction company
Metcalf had hired to do the job was later found brutally murdered, as well as his family, several
months after completion of the compound, all of the bodies drained of their blood. The
construction crew had been made up of illegal immigrants and all of them disappeared at the
same time also, at least as far as the authorities were concerned. Of course, the police were still
looking for them thinking that one or more of them might’ve had something to do with the
massacre of their boss and his family, but the authorities weren’t going to find any of them. The
ones that were still living were “guests” within Metcalf’s private lab, the others were long since
dead and disposed of. As far as Metcalf knew, aside from Serena and her people, no one outside
of the compound had any idea about its existence, and he was going to keep it that way.

The walls leading down the staircase were covered with two-inch thick sheets of titanium.
It would take two of the other vampires to lift the cement slab that he had just lifted, and that
would only be if they could get the proper footing to support themselves which they wouldn’t be
able to do on that narrow staircase. Any of the other vampires that found themselves in this area would be stuck. They wouldn’t be able to lift the slab, nor would they be able to tunnel through the titanium walls. He had made it impossible for any of his staff to leave the compound unless he let them out.

Metcalf reached the bottom of the staircase and unlocked a four-inch thick titanium-reinforced security door that led into the compound, then entered the “cattle” pen area. This was where they housed their collection of transients, hookers, runaways, street people and illegals for daily milking; a total group of ninety such disposable people—or livestock as he thought of them. They were kept nine to a pen, with each pen being fifteen by fifteen feet and containing three army cots, along with a toilet and water faucet. The “livestock” were milked twice a day, taking a pint of blood during each milking. The average stay in a pen was six months—once they got ill or became too anemic to milk they would be drained of whatever blood they had left and disposed of; the same if they showed a hint of belligerence or disobedience. After each restocking there’d always be a few demonstrations needed before the rest would fall in line. Over time, though, they’d give up whatever faint hope they held and become merely ghosts—nothing more than shadows of their former selves. They’d never utter a word or dare to meet Metcalf’s eyes or show any resistance. Like cattle they would leave their cells when commanded and lie quietly during their milking.

Vanessa was taking a pint from one of the livestock. She nodded at Metcalf as he approached, he nodded back. She had been a prostitute before he infected her. Originally he had picked her up to be a replacement for one of the dead livestock, but he liked the way she looked—long red hair that fell halfway down her back, sultry lips, almond-shaped green eyes and a thin waist with near perfect legs. Her breasts were smaller than what he typically liked—no bigger than what would fit in a champagne glass, but they had a perky quality to them so he decided to overlook that flaw, and besides, the infection would shrink them anyway. The infection had since bleached out her hair and had shrunk her tits to the size of small apples, but she dyed her hair the same reddish color as before and even with the changes to her body that the infection caused, he still liked the way she looked. There was something else about her that he found himself instantly attracted to. It took him a while to figure out what it was, but he eventually understood it. In her own way she was as ruthless as he was, even reminding him a bit of Serena, although she wasn’t nearly as cunning or as crazy. Since the other vampires were complaining about how overworked they were—and because of his immediate attraction to her—he infected her and added her to the staff. He was glad he did. Unlike the others, she accepted her situation and never showed any self-pity. As far as her competency, well, she never really developed a touch for drawing blood and was rough with the livestock, but it didn’t much matter. She’d get a pint out of them regardless of how many times she had to poke them searching for a vein. And it was not as if any of them were going to complain. All in all, Metcalf was glad he chose to infect her instead of making her one of the livestock.

“I thought you were going to take me riding last night,” she said, not bothering to hide the hurt in her voice.

“Later this week maybe.”

Every Tuesday night he made it a habit to take her to the main house for sex, and he’d been hinting for a few months now that he’d take her riding soon. He had given her a tour weeks ago of his private lab so he knew she wouldn’t try escaping—she understood full well what the cost would be if she tried and was unsuccessful. Still, though, it was always a balance. He needed to give the staff occasional respite from the compound to keep them from going stir-crazy, or worse, to keep them from getting desperate enough to try breaking out, but on the other hand he couldn’t afford even a single rogue vampire on the outside. The mathematics of it were staggering. One vampire infecting the population would lead to a disaster of momentous proportions. If not carefully controlled by someone like Metcalf, the disease would spread exponentially and would eventually leave the ever-growing population of vampires with no livestock to feed from. His methods might be cruel but they were necessary.

“I really want to go riding with you,” she said with a half-pout. She looked up to meet his dead pale eyes and smiled in the well-practiced way she would with any other john. “I’ll make it worth your while tomorrow night if you take me.”

“What? You’ve been holding out on me?”
“No, I wouldn’t say that, but I’m sure I could come up with something creative if you gave me the proper incentive.”

“We’ll see,” he said, his voice turning gruff. “How’s the milking? Any of them dried up?”

“I’m still getting pints out of all them. This one’s been a stubborn fucker, though. It took me five minutes to find a vein.”

Metcalf looked down at the livestock. The near-ghost must’ve been a vagrant before he’d been picked up. His face was now as thin as a railroad spike, his beard sparse, his cheeks hollowed out and his eyes small as they remained buried within dark circles of ruined, grayish flesh. There wasn’t much left of him, another week or two of milking at the most. Metcalf scanned the glass walls separating the cattle pens from the milking area and spotted several other livestock who looked like they were going to need replacing soon. He felt no emotion about it—to him they really were never anything more than livestock to feed off of and dispose. Whatever empathy a normal human being was born with had always been missing from his makeup. That part of him hadn’t changed because of the infection. He knew Vanessa was the same—that was really the thing about her that he had felt instantly attracted to even if he didn’t understand it at the time, and it was why he’d been feeling more of a bond with her. It was also why she was the only member of the staff that he still had assigned to milking. The compassion that the other vampires showed the livestock made him sick. Because of this growing bond he’d been considering moving her to the main house permanently. It seemed to make sense, and besides, she was far better at sex than the other female vampires. Even before he brought her back to the compound, he’d been gradually losing interest in the others. Their constant sadness was becoming a real turn-off.

“We’re going to need to restock some of them soon,” Vanessa said. She hesitated for a moment, then somewhat boldly asked, “Maybe I can go with you?”

He nodded. These disposables were so damn plentiful in LA—picking them up was like shopping for a carton of eggs at the supermarket. So, why not.

“That’s an idea,” he agreed.

That brightened her up. The pint bag had filled. She pulled the needle from the livestock’s arm. His face screwed up for a moment as if he were going to start bawling, but he controlled himself and instead rubbed his arm as he walked lifelessly back to his pen. Vanessa handed the pint bag to Metcalf. He made it a habit of having a freshly drawn pint when he entered the compound each morning. The sweetness of the blood—at least to his taste—seemed to degrade quickly, usually within minutes of being taken. He squeezed the blood into his mouth as if it were a pouch of wine. During the course of the day he would consume another six pints, and while it would leave him craving more, it would provide him the energy he needed. What he wouldn’t give to be able to eat a steak instead. Or a rack of ribs. Or a pint of ale. Jesus, just the thought of a warm pint of Guinness made his mouth water. But for the time being this was what he was stuck with.

“Do you want another pint?” Vanessa asked eagerly. “I still have a dozen more to milk. If you’d like to wait…”

He shook his head. “Not right now.”

“But you will take me riding later?”

“Yeah, I will.”

“And when you pick out more livestock?”

“You’ll come along.” He looked away from her. “I’m thinking of other changes. Maybe moving you into the main house permanently.”

Her face flushed a light pink with the news. Without a word she crouched so that she was nearly sitting on her heels, then undid the zipper of his chinos and pleasured him with her lips and tongue. The fact that the livestock might’ve been watching was of no consequence to her, nor for him. The fact that she looked at them the same as he did excited him. When she was done she wiped her mouth and asked him whether she could move to the house that night.

“Let me think about it.” He fingered his scar as he considered her. “You’re still going to be assigned to the milking.”

“That’s okay. I kind of like it.”

“And you know what will happen if you cause any problems?”

“I won’t cause any problems.”
His eyes held steady on hers.
“I have a spot in my lab reserved for you if needed,” he said.
“I know that.”

He zipped up and told her to finish her milking, that they’d talk more later. He watched as Vanessa took another of the livestock—a teenage girl whom Metcalf vaguely remembered picking up months earlier while she was hitchhiking. The girl now looked haggard and had aged well beyond her years. She would need replacing soon also. Metcalf watched for a minute as Vanessa probed several times for a vein within the teenage girl’s withered arm before hitting pay dirt. Once the blood was draining into the plastic bag, he left to check on more of the staff.

Juliet and Maritza were working in the kitchen preparing oatmeal for the livestock. Juliet had been a pert blonde with a slender athletic body before her infection, Maritza a dark-haired illegal whom Metcalf had found living out of a back seat of a rusted-out Dodge Polaris. Both of them had since let their hair go white with seemingly no interest in dyeing it. In both cases their tits had shrunk up even smaller than Vanessa’s. With Juliet, the infection had narrowed her body to the point where she looked more like a teenage boy than a woman, and her arms had become almost like gristle. Before her infection, Maritza could’ve passed for Eva Longoria’s younger sister. Now she looked like an old woman. Metcalf didn’t like the fact that neither of them were even making a pretense of keeping up their appearance, and was thinking that if this continued their roles within the compound were going to be changing quickly. If they were complaining now with their saunas and swimming pools and large-screen home theatres, just wait. They didn’t have an inkling what hell really was.

Juliet heard him approaching and gave him a slow disapproving look. Maritza didn’t bother acknowledging his presence. Making a face, Juliet said, “If we gave them some meat occasionally, maybe they wouldn’t get so anemic so fast. Maybe they’d be able to last longer.”

Metcalf forced a smile.
“Fuck that. If I can’t eat steak, neither can they.”
“I’m just saying—”
“Your suggestion is noted. Okay?”
Juliet’s brow furrowed, her eyes turning to hard angry slits.
“I’m just trying to be practical,” she said. “They need more iron in their diet. It doesn’t have to be steak. We could feed them liver.”

Metcalf stared coldly at her. Without being aware of it he was clenching and unclenching his hands, the annoyance building up in him. Months earlier he had given in and started buying them bushels of apples because Juliet claimed they needed the extra vitamins. He figured he’d be magnanimous—if he were willing to feed his horses that, then okay, he’d feed the livestock the same. Oats and apples, a few carrots. But this was fucking ridiculous. Maybe before being infected he wasn’t a big fan of liver, but he’d cut off his right hand now to be able to enjoy a plate of it with some bacon and onions.

“What would be the point of having them last longer?” he asked, his tone artificially flat and even-keeled. “Would that be doing them any favors?”

Juliet’s mouth closed as she tried to think of an argument. Maritza stood quietly stirring the oatmeal, her eyes cast down and staring into nothingness. Metcalf noted how she pretty much had the same look about her as the livestock.

“I need to get outside,” Juliet muttered at last. “It’s been over four months…”

Metcalf saw nothing but a flash of red. He’d been hearing hints of her grumblings for a while now—and not just hers but others too—and this was the final straw. The red flashing inside his brain blew up into something raging. Deaf and dumb to her, he grabbed her by the wrist and jerked her off her feet. Maritza started to cross herself but caught herself midway. She stared back into the pot and continued to blindly stir the oatmeal as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. In his mind’s eye, Metcalf spat fire as he dragged Juliet out of the kitchen area and into the vampires’ housing quarters.

“This isn’t fucking enough for you!” he roared, waving a hand at the Olympic-size swimming pool and three Jacuzzis that he dragged her past. She pleaded with him to stop but he didn’t hear her over the inferno burning inside him. He dragged her along the Italian marble tiles as if she were nothing but a bed sheet.

“Everything I bought you fucking ingrates is top of the line!” he continued to roar as he
dragged her through the gaming area which had a simulated golf course, two racquetball courts, ping-pong tables and pool tables. Several of the vampires were watching the movie Sideways on one of the large-screen home theatres and looked over with a mix of curiosity and alarm. None of them bothered to get involved. They knew better than to try to calm Metcalf down.

“There are people spending a grand a day to stay at spas not as nice as what I built for you fucking ingrates, but nothing’s ever enough, is it?”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean anything—”

“Shut up! You’re so fucking anxious to go outside, well fuck you, I’m taking you outside!”

He bent her arms behind her back and dumped her on his shoulders, carrying her as if she were a sack of grain. Moving fast, he ran through the compound and then out the titanium security door. Juliet was wailing, trying to fight back, but in the position she was in all she could do was kick harmlessly. Metcalf raced up the stairs with her on his shoulders, and with the adrenaline pounding within him, lifted the concrete slab as if it were cardboard. With her still on his back, he sprinted through the barn, then dumped her outside. She had little protection other than a tee shirt and shorts, and the sunlight hit her hard. Within seconds she was writhing on the ground desperately trying to shield her face from the sun. Metcalf ripped off the little clothing she had on and that left her shrieking. Every time she tried to get to her feet, Metcalf kicked her back to the ground. After ten minutes of that she quit fighting and lay curled up in a fetal position, her thin leathery body wracked with sobs. Metcalf slowly calmed down and became aware of where he was and what he was doing. He realized that there was a remote chance someone driving by with a pair of binoculars could spot them. While it was highly unlikely it wasn’t worth taking the risk. He flung Juliet over his shoulder and carried her into the barn and back to the compound. Vanessa was still milking the livestock and raised an eyebrow as he brushed past her. Whatever she said Metcalf didn’t hear. He carried Juliet into the kitchen area and dumped her by Maritza’s feet.

“She finishes her shift or she becomes one of my private projects. Make it both of you. Understand?”

Maritza nodded, her face blanching to the same shade of white as her hair. She kneeled down and sprinkled water into the other vampire’s face to revive her. Juliet started to mutter gibberish, her eyes fluttering weakly, her mouth a gaping hole. Metcalf watched disinterestedly. From his own experimentation he knew how painful unprotected exposure to the sun could be, but he also knew it caused no lasting damage. At one time he had taken several of his experiments to a remote area of the Mojave Desert where he chained them spread eagle between cactuses. While Metcalf spent twelve hours shielded by a tent, his experiments were left to wither under the full exposure of the desert sun. Over those twelve hours they all dried up like prunes, but feeding them an ounce of blood restored them back to their previous state. Throughout the twelve hours they howled as if their skin were being peeled off, but they survived it.

If it had been any of the other vampires than Juliet giving him lip, he would’ve made them one of his private experiments. In her case, he’d give her this warning. She was well-liked among the other vampires, and it would cause more problems than it was worth if he acted too hastily with her. Besides, it never hurts to occasionally show one’s benevolent side.

“I was in a good mood before she started her shit,” Metcalf complained peevishly.

“She was out of line,” Maritza agreed under her breath.

The bitch was humoring him. He stood silently tracing the outline of his scar before deciding to let it slide. The morning had been eventful enough.

“The next time I see you I want you to be a brunette again,” he told her. “You tell her she better damn well be a blonde. And I want to see makeup on both of you. For both your sakes I’d better start seeing some effort.”

She nodded, stone-faced.

“And for Chrissakes, just give her some blood,” he said, not bothering to hide his disgust. He left her and headed to the research lab that was located past the housing quarters. A corridor had been built that ran past the kitchen to the lab so he didn’t have to cut through the housing quarters, which was just as well. He wasn’t up to any more bullshit.

He stopped outside the lab, collected himself, and when he felt like he could breathe
normally again, entered. The scientists that he had cherry picked over the past two years were all at work, either bent over research equipment or studying simulation results on their computer screens. These included several of the leading AIDS researchers in the country, along with top immunologists and experts in bioengineering and computer modeling. Metcalf had bought them all of the equipment they’d asked for. All of it state of the art, all of it damn expensive. After two years of them working sixteen-hour days they were still no closer to understanding the vampire virus than when they started—which was a source of constant irritation to Metcalf. He damn well wanted results, and if not an outright cure for the virus at least a way to mutate it so that an infected person could eat normal food and not be affected so severely by sunlight. Was that so fucking much to ask for?

Dr. George Chabot led the team. In his previous life he had been a Nobel Prize-winning immunologist. Before becoming infected he was a good-natured roly-poly man in his early fifties who wore thick soda bottle-type glasses and had long sideburns that blended into an old-fashioned style of whiskers—almost as if he were a playing a doctor in a 1950’s Three Stooges short. Like all other vampires he had since lost his body fat. He was now a stick figure compared to what he had been. Also, consistent with the virus his facial hair had fallen out and his skin was now smooth, although in his case his complexion had a waxy unnatural quality to it. The infection did nothing to improve his eyesight and he still wore the same soda bottle glasses as before. With his changed appearance he gave the impression of a turtle that had been removed from its shell.

Metcalf walked behind Dr. Chabot, who continued to sit hunched over a computer screen, trying hard to pretend he didn’t notice his visitor. Tremors shook through Chabot’s body, and after a minute of this he gave an act of looking startled.

“Oh, it’s you,” Chabot said.

Metcalf didn’t bother responding. His eyes narrowed as he squinted at the scientific data Chabot had been studying.

“I thought I heard a commotion earlier?” Chabot asked.

Again, Metcalf didn’t bother to answer his lead scientist. Chabot and the other scientists, as well as the rest of his staff, probably already knew about his incident with Juliet. They were like old women the way they spread gossip. Chabot in particular had to be nervous. For months he’d been dropping hints how he’d like to spend a few hours on the outside so he could visit his wife and children.

“Any progress yet?” Metcalf asked dryly.

“It’s only been three days since you asked me that last.”

“I’m asking again.”

Chabot shrugged. “This virus…it’s unlike anything ever seen before. It defies scientific explanation.”

“That’s not good enough.”

Chabot shrugged again, his neck disappearing. “We’re working as diligently as we can.”

“Again, not good enough.”

“What can I tell you. This virus…the effect it has on the skeletal structure and muscle tissue…its regenerative properties…this is a whole new area for us. At the moment we’re only children groping stupidly in the dark.”

“I want results.”

“We all do, sir. We all do.”

Metcalf stopped for a moment to run his thumb along the full length of his scar.

“Maybe I’ve been working you too hard,” he said. “Maybe all of you need a break. Some rest and relaxation.”

“That would be helpful,” Dr. Chabot conceded cautiously.

“It would give all of you a chance to clear your heads.”

“Sometimes that is what is most important in solving this type of problem,” Dr. Chabot agreed, nodding. “Yes, a chance to take a step back, to catch one’s breath. Many times that leads to fresh, innovative thinking.”

“In your case why don’t we arrange a visit with your family.”

Dr. Chabot licked his lips, his head involuntarily nodding up and down as if he were a bobble-head doll.
“Then it’s settled,” Metcalf said. “I’ll bring them here for you. Their accommodations will be up front. There should be several openings in the cattle pens soon.”

Dr. Chabot’s mouth dropped.

“Please no…”

“Isn’t this what you’ve been asking for?”

“Please not that. Please, no…”

“I thought this is what you’ve been sniveling about for the last six months.”

“Please, I beg of you. Not that. Not my family.”

“But you keep asking for it…”

“Not another word from me. I promise.”

A shadow fell over Metcalf’s eyes leaving them deader than they were.

“I’ve given you and your team everything you’ve asked for.”

“You have,” Dr. Chabot agreed.

“Computers, centrifuges, fluorescent microscopes—”

“True, true.”

“Incubators, cell harvesters… I can’t even pronounce the names of half the shit you’ve had me buy. But everything you’ve asked for I bought.”

“That is all true. Although…”

“What?”

“I could use a confocal microscope. And I’d like to upgrade our flow cytometer.”

Metcalf lowered his head into his hand so he could rub his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. He shook his head. “How much is this going to cost?” he asked in a soft whisper.

“What?”

“How much!”

“Oh. Not much. No more than two hundred thousand dollars.”

“Two hundred thousand…”

“If we buy it used.”

Metcalf stood rigid for a long moment before removing his hand from his face. His eyes pale blue ice as he looked at his lead scientist.

“Alright,” he said. “Fine. Write me down the model numbers, I’ll order it. But I need results.”

“Your will get them. Eventually we will crack this.”

“You’re not listening to me. I need results. Now.”

“We’re doing everything we can.”

Metcalf waved Dr. Chabot closer with his index finger. When the immunologist got off his chair, Metcalf took hold of the doctor by his skull and pulled him towards him so he could talk with his mouth inches from the doctor’s ear.

“You need to listen carefully to what I’m saying. When I tell you I want results now that is exactly what I mean. In one month I want to be able to enjoy a steak dinner.”

“B-But it’s not that simple. We can’t solve these digestive issues until we better understand the virus. It’s all tied together, you see. The virus—somehow it feeds on the digested blood. No other virus acts this way. And just as it does that, it similarly prohibits the generation of any digestive enzymes. More than just that it actively attacks and destroys any artificial enzymes that may be entered into the digestive system. It is as if it doesn’t want any competition for the digested blood. It’s quite amazing, really. We will solve this, but only after we successfully model and understand this virus better. Patience is of utmost importance.”

Metcalf let go of the doctor, who fell back into his chair and nearly toppled over before righting himself. Rubbing his eyes and then staring bug-eyed at Dr. Chabot, Metcalf asked him what else he needed.

“Nothing else right now, no.”

“How about more test subjects?”

“Not now, no.” Dr. Chabot rubbed a hand across his lips, his expression turning queasy.

“When do I’ll let you know.”

Metcalf continued to stare bug-eyed at his lead scientist. “I’m losing confidence in you and your team,” he said finally.

Dr. Chabot shrugged, showing an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, what more can I say?”
“You’d better say something because if I don’t have confidence in you and your team, then I might as well start over and build a new one from scratch.”

“What do you want me to say?” Dr. Chabot asked, an urgency creeping into his voice. The other scientists in the room were looking over at them and paying attention to their conversation.

“All I know is you need to say something to help rebuild my confidence. Maybe there’s someone out there who could make a difference?”

Dr. Chabot squeezed his eyes shut. A pained expression screwed up his turtle-like face. His complexion changed from waxy to an ashen gray.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he said.

“How about Dr. Ravi Panjubar,” one of the other scientists volunteered.

Metcalf stared hard at his lead scientist. A vein had started to beat along his right eye.

“Well?” he asked.

Dr. Chabot nodded, his face now a mask of pure agony.

“Dr. Ravi Panjubar could be of help,” he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. “He is doing exciting work in the use of nanotechnology to alter the DNA structure in mice. Yes, he could be of help to the team.”

“Significant help?”

Dr. Chabot nodded.

“Where is he?”

“Stanford.”

“No one closer? Maybe someone at USC or UCLA doing similar work?”

Dr. Chabot looked away. “Just him.”

Metcalf clapped the scientist on the shoulder and nearly knocked him out of his chair.

“Alright then,” Metcalf said with a cheerful smile. “If it’s just him then it’s him you’re going to get. And for Chrissakes quit fretting. Think of it this way, you’re giving him the opportunity of a lifetime. Isn’t that what you scientists are all about? Challenges? None bigger than this one. Someday he’ll be thanking you.”

Dr. Chabot nodded dismally and turned back to his computer screen.

Chapter 3

Don Hayes was glad he was packing some serious firepower. He’d never been to Kansas City before and didn’t know what to expect, but the neighborhood he ended up in was as bad as any back home in Brooklyn. Half the store fronts were boarded up, and the ones still in operation were either bars, tattoo parlors or pawnshops. Scattered along the sidewalks were an equal mix of the homeless, derelicts, drug addicts and street toughs. One of the derelicts he drove past was too busy shooing away imaginary flies to bother looking at him, but the other people he passed made sure to give him a long predatory-type stare—especially the street toughs as they sized him up and tried to decide whether he was worth the risk to carjack. Fortunately, so far none of them decided he was. Also, fortunately, as a licensed PI from the state of New York, he had a permit to carry a concealed weapon, and weighing down the inside of his sports jacket was a Smith & Wesson 9mm pistol. He patted the bulge lining his jacket and breathed a little easier. He also had under his seat a police blackjack from his days on the force—an eleven inch piece of weighted spring steel covered in leather. If anyone tried reaching into his car he was prepared, but still, he didn’t want trouble. Around this neighborhood that was all he could smell.

At the next street corner he slowed down enough to read the street sign, then pulled over and parked next to a vacant store front. After getting out of the car, he gave a quick look around. A couple of street toughs were eyeing him from a few storefronts down but stayed where they were. Either they sensed he was armed or simply decided to wait for easier prey.

Hayes unfolded the fax he had received from the Kansas City Sentinel two days earlier to make sure he had the right address, then walked down the side street he had parked near and searched for the alleyway where a local crack and meth dealer, Devon Wilkerson, was found with his throat torn out and most of his blood drained. He stopped for a moment to squat at the sun and then to wipe a handkerchief along the back of his neck. Damn it was muggy here. Hot as hell too, like a steam bath. Ten minutes outside of the air-conditioning of his car and he was already sweating.
Up ahead a homeless man was picking through a dumpster and loading trash into a shopping cart. Even in the oppressive heat, the man wore several layers of clothing under a winter jacket. Hayes walked up to him and pointed a thumb towards the alley they were standing next to and asked if that was where Wilkerson was murdered.

The homeless man’s eyes looked foggy. “Whazzot,” he croaked out.

Hayes didn’t know if this was meant as a question or statement. He tried again, talking slower. “The drug dealer who was murdered around here. Was it in this alley?” Hayes said. He consulted a notepad. “The man who was murdered was big, over six and a half feet. African-American. Had his throat cut open. He was found dead ten days ago in an alley off this street.”

The homeless man shrugged noncommittally, his eyes clouded and glassy. No question he was on something.

“Dunno.”

Hayes pulled a ten-dollar bill from his wallet. The bill was snatched from his hands. Hayes watched as the homeless man folded it carefully and placed it in a pocket inside his jacket lining. He nodded and pointed down the alley. Flecks of dirt or bugs or something flew off his hair as he did this.

“Vampires,” he said.
“Did you see anything?”
“No no yo. Not me. Saw nothin’. Sayin’ nothin’ more.”

The homeless man grabbed his shopping cart and pushed it away. He looked back at Hayes a few times until he was satisfied the PI wasn’t following him. Hayes watched as the man turned the corner and disappeared from sight, then glanced at his notes again and walked to the end of the alley. Outside of several trash cans there wasn’t much else there. Any signs of the murder had been cleaned up. Hayes spotted a sewer grate under one of the trash cans. He had done a weather lookup on Yahoo and knew it had rained heavily the morning before the body was discovered—intense thunderstorms was how they put it. That probably had more to do with the alley being cleaned of blood than anything else.

Hayes stood silently trying to envision what would’ve brought Wilkerson to the alley. He could’ve been chased down it, but more likely was lured to the spot. He closed his eyes and tried to feel any vibes from the murder site and imagine what happened that night. From his photos the victim was a scary looking sonofabitch. Six foot six, two hundred and thirty pounds, with a long string of arrests for drug dealing and violent assaults, but no convictions. Hayes had a rough idea what the police were thinking—that the murder was over territory and that a competing dealer was trying to grab Wilkerson’s slice of the trade. Hayes had a different idea of the murder, but then again, he was looking at it from a different angle. The local police didn’t know what he knew. That this wasn’t an isolated incident. That there was a serial killer crisscrossing the country killing a lot of bad guys like Wilkerson.

Hayes sighed and headed back to his car. In all good conscience, he should go to the FBI with what he suspected but it wasn’t as if he had anything concrete, just a growing folder of circumstantial evidence. Maybe it wasn’t quite ethical, but he was under no legal obligation to report unproven hunches. Also there was the complication that his client was paying him a lot of money—twice his going rate, to work this case fulltime, along with a promise of a hundred-grand bonus if he found the guy she wanted found. When she hired him she insisted that he keep his investigation confidential, that anything he found would be reported only to her. He agreed to her demands. She wasn’t the kind of woman he could say no to. Just thinking of her got his heart pumping. Serena Jones. Jesus, she was something…

Not that he could say she was beautiful. No, that wouldn’t be the right way to describe her, not with this weird cat-like look about her and with how thin and lean she was with almost no tits. But damn was she sexy. Partly it was those green eyes of hers, partly it was the way she dressed in skintight leather, but mostly it was that she seemed to ooze sexuality. It was as if it came off her like perfume. Just the way she looked at him would make him hard—not that he would ever have a chance to do anything about it; she was well out of his league. But a guy could dream, couldn’t he?

He returned to his car and retrieved his case folder and also the police blackjack from
under the driver’s seat. He slipped the sap into his belt so that it was hidden by his shirt. He still had several hours before he was going to be meeting the police detectives investigating Wilkerson’s murder, and this area seemed as good a place as any to start interviewing witnesses. He kept a wary eye on the street toughs who were hanging around the neighborhood, as they did him, and went from bar to bar showing Wilkerson’s picture along with two sketches that he had. The first sketch was one that Serena had helped him make of the man she wanted found. The physical resemblance between Serena and “Jim” was strong enough that Hayes thought they had to be related, maybe even brother and sister. Both were athletic, almost unnaturally lean, with the same cat-like quality to their features and uniquely shaped faces. Serena insisted that they weren’t related, and further that she had no idea what Jim’s last name was. She was also tightlipped about her connection to Jim and why she wanted him found. Hayes didn’t push it, but he was going by the theory that they were of the same blood.

At the fourth bar Hayes tried, the bartender recognized Wilkerson’s picture.

“He’s the dude killed in an alley a few blocks from here, right?” the bartender asked.

“Yeah. Did you know him?”

“Nope.”

“Did he ever come in here?”

The bartender smiled vaguely showing off some badly nicotine-stained teeth. “Can’t remember.”

He started to walk away, but made it slow. When Hayes put twenty dollars on the bar, the bartender’s face screwed up into a pained expression as if he were trying to pull an obscure piece of trivia from his brain. When Hayes added another twenty, the bartender collected the money and told him that he remembered seeing Wilkerson around.

“How about ten or so days ago?”

A glint showed in the bartender’s eyes. “You mean the night he was killed?”

“Yeah.”

He thought about it and shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. “He could’ve been, but I can’t remember when I saw him last. He wasn’t the type of guy I wanted to pay attention to.”

“This is where he did business?”

“I couldn’t tell you about that.”

At that hour there were only a half dozen customers distributed along the bar and tables. The bartender waved over the lone waitress; a very skinny redhead in her early twenties wearing a short miniskirt and sleeveless blouse that was tied off midway up her stomach. The waitress looked like she was single-handedly keeping the local tattoo parlors in business with a couple of dozen tattoos on her neck, arms and ankles, and probably places Hayes wasn’t privileged to see. She also had almost as many visible piercings as ink. The bartender showed her Wilkerson’s picture and asked when she last remembered seeing him.

“That’s the dead guy?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know.” She scrunched up her face while she gave the matter some thought.

“Maybe two weeks ago?” she said.

Hayes showed them his sketch of Jim. Neither of them remembered seeing him. The waitress promised Hayes that if that guy were ever in there she’d remember seeing him. “I’d be all over him,” she said. “Fuck, he’s hot looking.”

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Hayes couldn’t help smiling. A hot-looking serial killer. Great. The same women who wouldn’t give him the time of day find this guy hot-looking. Of course, he was in his late forties while this “hot-looking” serial killer was about fifteen years younger, but it had always been this way. He showed both of them his other sketch. This one was of a women in her early twenties with large brown eyes, high cheekbones and a gauntness to her face. In the picture she was a blonde, but Hayes suspected that wasn’t her true hair color and that she frequently wore different colored wigs. The drawing was of an extraordinarily beautiful woman and, like this waitress, was someone who favored hot-looking serial killers over solid but average-looking PIs.

The bartender nodded. “I remember her. But she wasn’t a blonde.” He winked at the waitress. “She was a redhead like Chelsea.”

“In a pig’s eye,” the waitress said. “She was wearing a wig.”
“You saw her also?”

“Yeah, I saw her. The way she was dressed I thought she was a hooker, but she was too
good-looking for that. I couldn’t understand what someone like her was doing here. Not our
typical lady customer. Her hair was a fake. Definitely. I remember her eyebrows being a dark
brown. I wanted to tell some of the guys drooling over her that there was only one natural
redhead in the place.”

The bartender leered at her. “Bullshit,” he said. “Chelsea, you’re a dye job if I ever saw
one.”

“Fuck you.”

“Prove me wrong then. Easy enough for you to do.”

“How many times do I have to say it, Ossie. Fuck you.”

The bartender got a laugh out of that.

Hayes brought them back to the subject at hand. “How close does she look to this sketch?”

“Damn close,” the bartender said.

“Outside of the hair, yeah, that’s her,” the waitress agreed.

“Either of you remember her being here with Devon Wilkerson?”

They both gave him blank stares.

“The guy who was murdered,” Hayes said, pointing again at Wilkerson’s picture.

They both thought about it. The bartender nodded slowly. “Fuck, I think he was talking to
her. Yeah, goddamn, I think he bought her a couple of drinks.”

“Did he leave with her?”

The bartender’s eyes glazed over as he tried to remember. “I dunno. I don’t think so.”

One of the patrons sitting at a table had lifted an empty beer glass and was signaling to the
waitress. She asked the bartender for another Bud. While he poured her a draft, she put a hand
on Hayes’ arm and told him she had to get back to work. “It’s been fun, Hon,” she said. “You
come by after my shift ends at one and maybe I’ll be able to think of something else.”

Both Hayes and the bartender watched the movement of her barely covered ass as she
brought the draft to the table.

“I’ve been trying to get in her pants for a year now,” the bartender complained, mostly
talking to himself. He gave Hayes a look that basically said What the fuck does she see in an
ugly sonofabitch like you? All Hayes could do was shrug. The bartender’s face reddened. He
moved over to the beer taps and started to replace an empty keg. Without bothering to look at
Hayes, he said, “We’re done here, right? I gotta get back to work, pal.”

Hayes was done. Besides, he had two Kansas City police detectives he needed to talk to.
On his way out, the waitress gave him a look to let him know that she wasn’t kidding him
earlier; that if he came by at one she’d be waiting.

Hayes felt his heart skip a beat. Maybe all this time looking for “Jim” a bit of the serial
killer’s charisma had rubbed off. Goddamn. Hayes’ imagination started working overtime as he
pictured where he was going to be uncovering secret tattoos on the waitress, and even better,
additional body piercings. It was sobering, though, stepping out of the bar and seeing a half-
dozen or so street predators leaning against storefronts turning their eyes towards him. Sighing
heavily, he forced his attention away from what the waitress was offering and back to the job at
hand.

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Detectives Bobby Brindle and Lou Marzon got a kick out of the story Hayes told them
about why he was interested in Devon Wilkerson’s murder. It was total bullshit but the same
story had played well with detectives in other cities so he kept using it. A lesson he learned
while on the force was the more outlandish the lie the more willing people were to buy it. If he
tried feeding a perp some bullshit about having a witness they’d just start smirking. If he told
them instead that he had CIA satellite photos of them in the act of the crime they’d invariably
start bitching about how it was a violation of their privacy.

“So who’s this famous writer?” Brindle asked while shoveling a chunk of steak into his
mouth. Hayes was buying the detectives steak dinners and beers in exchange for what they had
on the Devon Wilkerson murder.

“Sorry, I’ve been sworn to secrecy.”

“Come on,” Brindle said, his eyes shining with amusement. “You can confide in us. Who
are we going to tell? It’s Stephen King, am I right?”
“None.”
“Then that guy who wrote the DaVinci Code, right?”
“Not even close.”
“Well I’m out then,” Brindle said, a look of constipation falling over his round face as he tried to think of other names. “How about you, Lou. You think of any other big shot writers?”
Detective Marzon paused from chewing on a piece of steak to shake his head. He asked incredulously, “This guy really wants to write a book about this scumbag’s murder?”
“That’s what he’s thinking.”
“Unbelievable.” Marzon shook his head again, scowling. “And he sends you to research it for him?”
“Yep.”
“Pays for your airplane ticket and all your expenses?”
“You got it.”
“Fucking unbelievable,” Marzon said. “What a waste of money. Devon’s not worth spending a cent on.”
“You can’t tell us who this big shot is?” Brindle asked.
“Only that he’s a best selling author,” Hayes said with a wink. “Millions are going to be reading this book. A lot more will see the movie.”
Shit, Brindle mouthed silently.
Marzon swallowed a mouthful of food, then took a swig of beer. “I still don’t get why any writer would care about what happened to a shitbag like Devon,” he said.
“Who the fuck knows with these writers? He read about the murder over the Internet and something about it inspired him.”
“Who’d ever think Devon would inspire anything other than a good argument for capital punishment?” Brindle asked, chuckling lightly.
“I don’t know. There were times he came close to inspiring me to unload my service revolver in his mutt-ugly face,” Marzon said.
“You have to admit something’s a little funny here,” Hayes cut in. “Even if he was nothing but a scumbag, you still have him found in an alley with his throat mostly cut out and almost all his blood drained.”
Brindle speared a chunk of meat with his fork. He held his fork out towards Hayes as if making a point with it.
“Nothing so unusual about it, not for a shitbag like Devon. He was dead forty-eight hours before we found him. It rained like hell for those two days. All that happened was he bled out and his blood washed down a sewer grate.”
“Maybe it was vampires,” Hayes said with a smile.
Marzon looked up from his food. “Where’d you get this shit about vampires?” he asked.
Hayes’ smile stretched half an inch. “At the crime scene. A homeless guy pushing a shopping cart told me it was vampires.”
That cracked Brindle up. Marzon shook his head.
Hayes gave him a questioning look.
“Ding dongs, you know, those cupcakes with the crème filling,” Marzon explained as he tapped his skull with his index and middle fingers. “Nothing but mush for brains.”
Brindle had to spit some food into a napkin to keep from choking. “Jesus,” he said, wiping some tears from his eyes. “Vampires. No kidding? Sorry to disappoint them. It wasn’t vampires. We know the guy who did it. We just don’t have enough yet to pick him up.”
“Who do you have?”
“A scumbag drug supplier Devon worked for. Word on the street, Devon was taking a bigger slice than he was entitled to and this even bigger piece of shit wanted to make him an example.”
“What was used?”
“What do you think?”
“A knife?”
“That’s all it was. An ordinary hunting knife. No teeth, no fangs. It might’ve been pretty brutal, but it was nothing you or I couldn’t do if we wanted to. Nothing spooky about this. Only exactly what it looks like—one scumbag killing another. Sorry if your client’s going to end up disappointed. This is going to make one boring novel if you ask me.”

“Well, it is what it is.” Hayes smiled thinly. “Doesn’t mean, though, that’s how he’s going to write it. You’re sure of the time of death?”

Brindle nodded. “Medical Examiner pegged him dead for forty-eight to sixty hours before the body was found. No witnesses yet. With it raining as hard as it was there was no reason for anyone to wander into that alley.”

“Was there a reason for Wilkerson to be there?”

“Only the obvious one. He was probably waiting to pick up a new supply when someone snuck up behind him and cut his throat. He had no defensive wounds, so that’s probably how it played out.”

“Sounds pretty cut and dried,” Hayes said, forcing a straight face.

“Nothing for anyone to shed any tears over,” Marzon volunteered.

Hayes signaled the waitress for another whiskey and soda for himself and more beers for Marzon and Brindle. The trail was only two weeks old, maybe Jim and his girlfriend hung around after Wilkerson’s murder. He couldn’t help feeling excited about being this close to the killer, he also couldn’t help feeling some guilt over not filling these detectives in on what they were really dealing with. Dinner ended up being a leisurely one with Hayes trading stories with the two detectives about his days on the force in Brooklyn. Cigars were lit and a half dozen more beers were bought for each detective while Hayes milked his last whiskey and soda so he could limit himself to three drinks. It wasn’t just so he’d be ready for that waitress later, he still had more work to do that night. He also didn’t want to sound at all tipsy when he called his client.

After dinner, he hit the low-budget motels around the airport. He knew the type of motel that Jim and his girlfriend usually stayed at. Dirt cheap, no frills, and always at motor lodges where the rooms had their own street level entrances. Hayes guessed that Jim wanted to be able to enter and leave his room without a desk clerk noticing him. These were places that were usually used for hours instead of nights—the type of motels favored by drug addicts and prostitutes.

After Hayes ran out of motels around the airport, he cracked open a Kansas City yellow pages and expanded his search. Two hours later he found the one Jim and his girlfriend had been staying at. It was as seedy as all the others Hayes had tracked them to, and it was less than two miles from the alley in which Wilkerson was killed in. The desk clerk, a thin man in his twenties with a sallow complexion and bad teeth, looked bored, and clearly had little interest in talking to a PI. Stifling a yawn, he examined the sketch Hayes showed him. He nodded, recognizing the girl.

“She wasn’t a blonde, though,” he said. “That babe was definitely a brunette. And it was no dye job.”

“You paid close attention to her then?”

He grinned, showing off bad gums and crooked teeth. “Shit, take a look at her.” He glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice “Why wouldn’t I pay close attention to a piece of ass like that?”

Hayes showed him Jim’s sketch. The desk clerk gave it a quick look and told the PI he didn’t recognize the guy. “She was the only one I saw from her room, but I’m pretty sure she had company. Whether it was this guy, I couldn’t tell you,” he added. This didn’t come as any surprise to Hayes. So far it had been the same story with every desk clerk Hayes had spoken to; the girl always checked in and out while Jim stayed out of sight.

“Did she give a name? Maybe a car registration?”

The desk clerk made a face at Hayes as if he were nuts. “She paid cash for the room. No name, and I didn’t pay attention to what type of car she had. Probably some junker, but I couldn’t tell you positively.”

Again, that didn’t surprise Hayes. Same old story. He leaned closer to the desk clerk and laid twenty bucks on the counter.

“When was she here?”

“We don’t keep a registry.”
“I’m sure you could figure it out.”

The desk clerk looked at the money, nodded, and slid the twenty dollars into a shirt pocket. Counting it out on his fingers he told Hayes that she was there for ten days. “She left Sunday,” he added.

Hayes felt a buzz of excitement. Sunday was only four days ago. This was the closest he’d been to their trail.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“Shit, yeah, I’m sure.”

“She didn’t say where she was going next?”

“No.”

“Any clue at all? Did you see any road maps? Did she ask for any directions?”

“Sorry. Nothing.”

“Anything unusual left in the room?”

The desk clerk shrugged. “I don’t know. You’ll have to ask the maid. She’ll be in tomorrow morning at seven.”

“How about a phone number?”

The desk clerk again made a face indicating Hayes was nuts. He started tapping impatiently along the counter. “You think this is the kind of motel where we keep a maid on twenty-four hour call? Or where she’s not an illegal and we actually care about keeping her phone number and address? Buddy, just come back here tomorrow at seven, give her twenty bucks also, and I’m sure she’ll tell you whatever she can, okay? In the meantime I have to get back to work.”

Hayes gave the desk clerk his cell phone number, along with another twenty, and asked him to call him if he thought of anything else that could help. As he left he felt a skip in his step, and had to keep his jaw clenched tight to prevent a broad smile from coming over his face. He had been on this assignment for over a year and this was as warm as he had gotten to Jim. But as excited as he felt, he also had some trepidation. He was going to have to call his client and explain to her how he ended up in Kansas City. Thinking about that dampened his spirits.

Up until this recent trip, she’d been calling him and telling him where to go next to look for Jim. After four or five months of that he started to make the connection about where she was sending him and recent murders of very bad men in the same cities, all of which were missing a good amount of blood. He had no doubt that Serena suspected Jim of these murders and was sending Hayes to these locations after scouring police reports. He also knew she was intentionally withholding this from him, and further, that she didn’t want him to make the connection. He knew she wouldn’t be happy that he figured it out, and knowing that made him nervous. As sexy as she was—as much as he longed to experience her in the sack, there was something about her that creeped the hell out of him. Big surprise, huh genius, he told himself, after all, all she’s doing is hiring you to track down a serial killer. But he knew that wasn’t it, at least not entirely. There was something else about her. Maybe it was the way he caught her a few times looking at him as if he weren’t even an insect. Those looks would be fleeting, nothing more than a shadow passing over her face, and it would leave him wondering whether he really saw what he thought he had or whether it was just his own insecurities acting up—after all, she was so damn sexy, and the best you could say about him was that he was an average-looking guy. Maybe he imagined those looks, maybe it was something else about her that gave him the willies. Whatever it was, he instinctively knew he didn’t want to get on her bad side.

He waited until he was back in his car before calling Serena. She answered her cell phone after the third ring, her voice as always with a soft sing-song lilt to it.

“Donald,” she half-purred, “this is a surprise.”

“Yeah, I’d expect so,” he said. He cleared his throat. “I found that our target was in Kansas City four days ago.”

She didn’t respond to that, instead she let a heavy silence hang between them while she waited for him to explain further. When he didn’t volunteer anything, she asked how he discovered such a thing.

“I had a hunch.”

“That’s not good enough.”

Her tone had shifted from amused to something that sent a chill down Hayes’ spine. There
was no longer a lyrical quality to her voice, more like the faint unpleasantness of glass breaking. Hayes found himself sweating.

“Something happened recently in Kansas City that made me want to check it out,” he said.

“Which was?”

Hayes took out his handkerchief and wiped it along his neck and forehead. He felt shaky. Deep inside he knew this was a mistake letting her in on what he knew. As if his voice were coming from outside of himself, he heard himself tell her about the pattern of murders he had recognized, and about the latest murder in Kansas City. There was a cold silence on her end that she eventually broke by asking Hayes if he had mentioned his theory to anyone else.

“You mean the authorities?” he asked.

“I mean anyone.”

“No, of course not,” he said. “You’re paying me for my confidentiality. As long as you’re not asking me to break the law, I’m under no legal obligation to go to the police with any hunches I have.”

“You do realize this hunch of yours is ridiculous?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What you’ve so ingeniously discovered has been nothing more than a series of bizarre coincidences.”

“I realize that’s possible.”

“No, Donald,” she said confidently, her sing-songish lilt back, “it is most definitely only a coincidence. But still, it’s been a lucky one since it led you to Jim. And only four days ago he was in Kansas City?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He could hear a slight purr on her end as she considered that. Then, “Any ideas where Jim might’ve gone next?”

“None yet. But I have a few more leads to check out. From our previous sightings, he seems to be heading to the East Coast.”

“It does seem that way.” Some more soft purring, then, “Donald, keep me informed if you find anything.”

“I will.” He hesitated, and wiped his handkerchief along his face and neck. “Serena, there is something else. Jim is traveling with a young woman, probably in her early twenties. I have a sketch of her that I am confident is of a good likeness.”

A painful silence, then her voice crackling like a whip, she asked, “Why haven’t you mentioned this to me before?”

Her tone took Hayes by surprise. He found himself stammering, telling her he needed to confirm this first, but that he was now convinced of Jim’s traveling companion.

‘Is…Is she pretty?’ Serena asked hesitantly, sounding a bit like a little girl.

“A matter of taste,” Hayes said.

“Would you say she’s pretty?”

“Not really my type,” Hayes lied.

“I see…Have you identified her?”

“No, not yet. I’ve sent her drawing to my old police partner in Brooklyn, and no matches to any missing persons reports.”

“Fax me her sketch as soon as you can,” she said; then impatiently, “Anything else?”

“I have an idea on how to flush them out,” he said. “I’d like to have my staff send her sketch to motels around the country. I have a good idea of the type they’ve been staying at, and we could target them offering a reward to anyone who spots her and contacts us. In a month we could have full coverage. It wouldn’t take long after that.”

“That is an excellent idea.” Her voice had softened back to its earlier sing-songish lilt. “I knew there was a reason I hired you other than simply your rugged good looks.”

Hayes found himself blushing. “There is a downside,” he said. “We could end up being flooded with false identifications. It could be expensive tracking them all down.”

“Expense isn’t an issue. It sounds well worth doing. Bravo, Donald, I am quite impressed.”

She must’ve put the phone down. He could hear her clapping on her end. Then the light tinkling of her laughter.
Hayes’ blush deepened. He also felt himself hardening between his legs. It was amazing the effect her voice could have on him—more powerful than a handful of Viagra. He was grateful more than ever that he had that tattooed and pierced freak of a waitress waiting for him.

“We could also get her sketch in newspapers across the country and offer a reward for information. It would be expensive, but we’d probably find her in a week or less—”

“No, Donald, your other idea sounds more than adequate. Newspapers would draw too much attention. But I am very pleased with your progress. Very much so. Please do continue to keep me informed.”

She hung up.

Hayes let loose with a loud exhalation, then shook his head smiling grimly to himself. He wished he had some idea where Jim and his girlfriend had gone off to next. More than ever he wanted to find the sonofabitch and be done with the case. He checked his watch and sighed heavily. It was nine-ten. Almost four hours before that waitress would be off duty. He got back in his car and drove the two miles to the murder site. Before leaving his car he took the safety off his 9 mm and slipped the sap under his belt so he’d have easy access to it. He walked back into the alley hoping to come across someone who might’ve seen something the night Devon Wilkerson was killed. He waited patiently without any luck until quarter to one, then headed off to his date.

Chapter 4

Metcalf’s private lab was reminiscent of some nightmarish scene from the Island of Dr. Moreau, and like Moreau’s laboratory, was a place of pain and abomination. For Metcalf, the lab served dual purposes; it helped him gain insights into the effects of the virus, and it acted as a deterrent to the other vampires in the compound from thinking about challenging his authority. The test subjects were all infected with the vampire virus. Some were originally brought in as “cattle” and had the misfortune of being chosen for this capacity—which was a fate far worse than being milked until illness or anemia set in; others were members of the compound who needed to be made examples of. All of the test subjects had their arms and lower halves removed; which made them appear like grotesque doll-like creatures. Some were pinned to their tables by spikes through their shoulders, others were chained along the walls. All of them were in the midst of experiments that would’ve made even the infamous Joseph Mengelev cringe in horror.

Metcalf strolled casually around his lab examining his experiments. Those that were capable of screaming out fought hard to hold their tongues; they knew their situations, however horrific, could be made worse. Moans escaped from a few of them, whimpers from a few others, but most kept quiet. Metcalf stopped at a table where a test subject had reached six months without being fed. The subject had shriveled to the point of looking more like a prune than anything that could’ve ever been human. Its eyes appeared dead, its mouth gaping open. Metcalf pulled the spikes out from its shoulders and carried it to a scale. Only thirty-four pounds. Before the experiment was started, the subject had weighed more than double that. Metcalf brought it back to its table and pounded the spikes back where they’d been. Not even a whimper. Metcalf had doubts whether it was still alive. If it were dead it would be the first time that he witnessed a vampire dying due to starvation. Using an eyedropper, Metcalf squeezed a drop of human blood into the thing’s gaping mouth. A sucking sound came from it.

“Still alive, huh?” Metcalf noted.

He squeezed the remaining blood from the eyedropper into the gaping hole. The glaze over the vampire’s eyes faded and a flicker of life shone in them. Metcalf slowly fed it an ounce of blood, and as he did so, the vampire plumped out like a raisin that had been dropped in water. It stirred slightly, its tongue pushing out, then choking noises rattled from its throat as it pleaded for more blood. Metcalf continued to feed it blood until it was restored to its former condition. Four ounces of blood had brought the vampire fully back. The vampire lay with its chest heaving sucking in oxygen. Metcalf scribbled notes on a clipboard that hung on the edge of the table.

“Please, no more…I’m begging…end it…please…end it…” the vampire forced out, its voice not much more than a hoarse whisper.

Metcalf looked up and made a shushing noise to the vampire before moving on to check
on other experiments. Although some of the vampires were made into these “guinea pigs” to teach the others in the compound a lesson, Metcalf took no sadistic pleasure in what he did, but neither did he feel the slightest hint of remorse. As far as he was concerned, these creatures didn’t even rate as lab mice, and he felt the same compassion towards them that a scientist might towards bacteria that was being examined under a microscope. These experiments allowed Metcalf to understand the virus at a more practical level, and that was all that mattered to him.

Smiling, he thought about how he could write a book on the subject…

Hell, make it a set of encyclopedias…

Early on he discovered that vampires could be killed fairly easily, at least easily for him, by cutting off their heads. Other than that method, which few other vampires had the strength to do without very sharp blades, they were damn hard to kill. Like goddamn cockroaches. Suffocating them, whether by drowning, gassing or simply sealing off a vampire’s nose and mouth, didn’t kill them; it only caused them to slip into a comatose state until oxygen became available. Metcalf had kept experiments submerged for months in tanks of water only to have them revive within seconds of being removed, and showing no discernable damage from their oxygen deprivation. He could burn them to death, but only after he had bought a cremation oven and was able to get the temperature to 2100 degrees Fahrenheit. Cooking a vampire long enough in a microwave oven also did the trick, but again, like requiring a cremation oven, it was impractical. The virus created a kind of super-immunity to lethal viral infections: Ebola, bubonic plague, hantavirus, and all the other viruses Metcalf exposed his test subjects to had little effect. Neither did exposure to deadly bacteria like meningitis or anthrax, nor any of the poisons that Metcalf had so far injected into their blood systems. Ingesting poison caused the same short-term violent reactions that ingesting any food would cause, but nothing more than that.

Metcalf stopped in front of one of his test subjects. Two days earlier he had injected the vampire with an ounce of venom from an Australian Brown Snake, which was enough to kill over ten thousand people. Outside of being somewhat dried out, the vampire looked no worse for wear.

“Would you like to be fed?” Metcalf asked it.

The vampire nodded glumly and Metcalf squeezed an ounce of blood into its mouth. After that ounce, the vampire appeared the same as before the snake venom injection. Metcalf scribbled notes on the clipboard next to the test subject. Over the course of a year, Metcalf had injected snake and spider venom, arsenic, cyanide, formaldehyde, ammonia, and numerous other poisons into this subject, all with little if any damage. As with viruses and bacterial exposure, poison seemed to have no real effect against the super-immunity caused by the vampire virus.

“You are a monster. A monster,” drifted in from behind him, a seemingly disembodied voice, barely a whisper. “You will burn in the fires of damnation. What you are doing to us will be done to you a million times over.”

Metcalf strained to hear where the voice was coming from and followed it to one of his vivisection experiments. Mildly disappointed, he understood why the test subject dared to speak out. It had nothing left to lose, or little, anyway. Metcalf had months earlier cut the vampire open and spread the skin apart so its insides were exposed, and over time had removed most of its organs. Spleen, liver, kidneys, esophagus and stomach were gone. Not much was really left other than its heart and one of its lungs.

The vampire’s jaundiced eyes held steady on Metcalf’s.

“You think you are a God?” it asked, its voice halting, ghostlike. “You are nothing. Less than dirt, that’s what you are. Some day there will be justice and you will suffer worse than you’ve made all of us suffer.”

“That may be true,” Metcalf said. “But you know something, I don’t believe I asked for your opinion.”

Metcalf reached into the vampire’s chest and squeezed its heart in his fist. A sick gurgling noise escaped the vampire’s lips and its eyes rolled up into its sockets. Metcalf decided to alter his experiment. He took a loose spike and drove it into the vampire’s heart. Unlike the supernatural myth associated with a vampire, a spike through the heart didn’t kill it. The virus would cause the damaged heart to regenerate its tissue as it tried to heal itself. From personal experience Metcalf knew the pain would be excruciating. If the spike were removed, the heart would completely regenerate in seconds and be as healthy as before the injury, but with the
spike in the way the newly generated tissue would wrap itself around the metal in a fruitless attempt for recovery. No, one spike through the heart wouldn’t kill a vampire, but maybe more than one would. Overtime Metcalf would discover how many it took, but he planned to stretch this experiment out and make it last years. He watched while the vampire writhed in agony, its mouth twisting as it tried to scream but in too much pain for any noise to escape. Satisfied that his point had been made to the other “guinea pigs”, he turned to the room and addressed them, asking if any of them had any other comments they’d like to share.

“Well?” Metcalf asked. “Most of you still have your tongues. Come on, if you have anything to say, let’s hear it.”

All he got back in response were a few soft moans.

He moved his gaze slowly around the room. Like the “cattle” in the feeding pens, the vampires pinned and chained around the lab looked away from him, none of them willing to meet his eyes.

“No complaints, huh? That’s good. I like to think I treat my lab rats as humanely as any other scientist. But I am always open—”

His phone interrupted him. The compound was thirty feet underground, but he had it built with a network of antennas and signal enhancers so that it allowed for cell phone reception. He took out his cell phone and saw that Serena was calling him.

“Jim was in Kansas City four days ago,” Serena said breathlessly.

Metcalf lowered his head into an open hand and rubbed his eyes. Christ, he wasn’t in the mood for this.

“So?” he asked.

“So? What do you mean so? We’re only four days behind him! We’re finally going to catch up to him!”

Metcalf rubbed his eyes some more. “Four days is a long time, Serena. He could be halfway across the country by now.”

“Always the eternal optimist, huh? Let’s say he is. It doesn’t matter. My little private eye has a spectacular idea on how to flush him out.”

Metcalf’s patience was quickly eroding. He never liked the idea of having a private detective snooping into their business, but he agreed to let Serena hire one a year ago. He didn’t think anything would ever come of it and at the time it seemed the best way to mollify her.

“Serena,” he said, trying hard to keep his annoyance in check. “This obsession you have with Jim is not healthy, and this whole private eye business—”

“Metcalf, darling, who the fuck are you to talk to me so condescendingly? Fuck you, my darling! Aren’t you the one who’s constantly harping on how we need to keep the virus contained? That we can’t afford as much as a single rogue vampire or we’ll all end up starving to death? Isn’t that the tune you keep singing?”

“Serena—”

“Answer me!”

“Okay, yes, that’s the deal, but Serena, let’s be reasonable. Jim isn’t out there spreading the virus—”

“How do you know that?”

“Look at what he’s been doing. The way he’s been feeding. Going from city to city, leaving dead bodies—”

“How do you know that’s not just a smokescreen? That he’s not secretly building his own army and planning to come after us?”

Metcalf stopped to rub his temples. Her normally soft melodic voice had turned into a high-pitched nails-on-chalkboard type screech and it was giving him a headache.

“A little paranoid, are we? Come on, Serena, we both know it’s not in his nature—”

“You of all people! The most paranoid fuck alive, and you dare to call me that!”

Her voice had become like a tattoo needle the way it pricked at his brain. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to slow down the throbbing deep in the back of his skull. Goddamn it! She knew she was full of shit, but he couldn’t argue with her. Technically she was right. The deal was no rogue vampires. Fucking bitch.

“Tell me how your private detective is going to flush him out,” he said as calmly as he could.
“Not to worry,” she cooed, her voice all at once back to its soft hypnotic tone. “It won’t draw us any attention. But we will be finding him soon.”

“If you say so.”

“Yes, my Darling, I do say so. And when we find him you will do as you promised?”

“Yeah.”

“Marvelous. Make sure to clear some space for him in that special room of yours. He’ll be a guest with you soon enough. Ta-ta for now.”

She hung up. Metcalf grimaced at the phone before slipping it back in his pocket. Nothing like a phone call from Serena to put him in the proper mood. In his mind’s eye he pictured her as one of his guinea pigs pinned to one of the lab tables. Ah fuck, the experiments he’d run on her. Thinking about it brought a thin smile to his lips, then he sighed and shook his head, trying to get his thoughts back on the present. A man can dream, can’t he? But Christ, thinking about what he would do to her did ease away some of the tension that had built up in his neck. He filled his lungs up, expanding his chest, and let loose one last sigh before turning back to his experiments.

* * * * *

Serena handed Zach her cell phone, then put her hands on her hips and stood naked examining herself in a full length antique mirror that was sheaved in decorative gold leaf and carvings of cherubs. Gregory and Wilfred relaxed behind her on eighteenth century red satin chaise lounges. The room they were in was mammoth in size—taking up the top floor of the seven story motel in Union Square that Serena had bought and converted six years earlier. With its Tommaso Geraci sculptures and Antonello de Messina paintings, along with its working stone fountain, the room could’ve been taken right out of a villa from her native Palermo, as opposed to a midtown Manhattan building.

“What do you think?” she asked them.

“A vision,” Zach said.

“Absolutely gorgeous,” Gregory offered.

“Stunning,” Wilfred agreed. “Just looking at you is giving me a boner like you wouldn’t believe.”

Serena smiled at that. “Later, my darlings.” She had to agree with them. While her tits had shrunk to almost nothing, she had the long legs and thin narrow waist that would be the envy of any model. And her ass—she dared anyone to find a fifteen-year old girl with a smaller or tighter ass than hers! She turned enough so she could admire the way her hair flowed halfway down her back. Like with all vampires, the infection had turned it white but she dyed it the same coal-black it was before. For a few years she thought the white patch of pubic hair growing between her legs was an amusing contrast, but had since become self-conscious about it and was now keeping the area shaved. She liked the prepubescent look it gave her, and besides, it seemed to be the current style.

“So how was our brutish friend?” Zach asked.

“An absolute bore, but we have his blessing,” Serena said, laughing bitterly.

Gregory made a face. “It’s insane that we have to beg him for his permission.”

Serena took a deep breath, shrugged.

“I can’t tell you how glad I am that he’s out of New York,” Gregory added. “But if you ask me three thousand miles isn’t enough.”

“A few thousand more would be better,” she said, her smile as bitter as her laugh had been. “If only we could drop him in the middle of the Pacific. But to be fair he does serve his purpose.” She paused to press a hand over her stomach, feeling how completely flat it was without even the slightest bulge, then ran her hands over her narrow hips. Her smile grew. This infection did have its advantages. “What color do you think for tonight?” she asked the three other vampires.

“Mahogany would be sublime,” Wilfred suggested.

Zach nodded his approval.

Serena took several steps towards Zach so she could caress his cheek and brush her lips against his ear. “Be a dear,” she asked him. While Zach went searching for her mahogany-colored outfit, she joined Wilfred on his chaise lounge and draped one arm around his shoulder while settling in his lap. Both their hands wandered towards each others’ genitalia. As they
caressed each other, Gregory watched and masturbated. Zach returned several minutes later
holding a reddish brown pair of leather pants and shirt in one hand and a pair of boots in
another. His eyes widened as he looked from Serena and Wilfred to Gregory, and then back.

“Once again I’ve been left out of the action,” he complained with a rueful smile.

“Oh Darling, don’t be such a spoilsport. We’ll find you a tight little thing for later
tonight,” Serena said.

She unwrapped herself from Wilfred so that Zach and Gregory could pull the leather pants
over her. After the pants were on, they zipped her shirt up from behind and then helped her with
her knee-high stiletto boots. While they did this, Wilfred prepared the heroin. The leather fit
Serena like a second skin, the outline of her navel and nipples clearly visible, as was the thin slit
of her vagina. She ran a hand over the leather, feeling the softness of it. Zach and Gregory did
the same. Wilfred brought over a mirror with thin lines of heroin dividing it. He snorted one of
the lines before handing the mirror to Serena. She did her line and then passed the mirror on.
After three passes each of the mirror, the heroin was gone. Serena ran her tongue over the
polished glass to pick up any of the residue, then closed her eyes to feel the rush from the
narcotic. A warmth flushed her skin bringing her body temperature temporarily above that of
a corpse. She could feel her heartbeat slowing, and then the euphoria. The infection dulled the
effects of narcotics and made overdoses impossible, but it still did some good. She opened her
eyes and smiled at Zach, who smiled lazily back at her. She could see that his pupils were
already starting to constrict.

“Ninotchka’s?” she asked them.

The other vampires nodded. Ninotchka’s was the current flavor of the month—one of
Manhattan’s trendiest hotspots. In another hour or so the place would be jammed tight with the
rich and beautiful crowd. The thought of being squeezed in among all that warm, hot flesh was
intoxicating to Serena. She’d be so close to them she’d be able to hear their blood pulsating
through their veins and their hearts beating like mad. Not that she would be feeding on any of
them. The heroin would keep her hunger suppressed, besides it had a large enough supply of
fresh blood as it was. Early on before Metcalf moved to the west coast, they maintained “cattle
pens” and milked their cattle each day. Serena never liked that, it was such a bother having to
dispose of the used up bodies. Once Metcalf left, she came to other arrangements, first buying
blood under the table from several blood banks, then infecting her sources when they eventually
tried to discontinue their arrangements. Enough blood was being delivered each day to keep the
twenty-two vampires in the house well fed. All in all, she was much happier with the
arrangement.

She headed towards the elevator with her fellow vampires following behind, all their
movements slower and more languid as the heroin took fuller effect.

“Just us four?” Zach asked.

“We’ll ask everyone tonight,” Serena said, her voice slowing to a soft drone.

Zach made a face, as did Wilfred. “Everyone?” Gregory asked. He shivered. “Some of
them are just too embarrassing to be seen with.”

Serena touched him lightly on the face and gave him an apologetic smile. It was true.
These three were infected for their company, and of course, the sex. Others were infected for
different reasons, especially the ones who were wealthy and were made to transfer their funds to
her. In her little hive all served a purpose.

“Darling, tonight is a night for celebration. Try to be magnanimous, won’t you?”

None of them argued with her. Not that it would’ve done any good.

* * * *

Carol sat at the bar nursing her third shot of tequila. The place was one of those
nondescript divey bars dotting East Cleveland that didn’t bother with music or entertainment and
only served no-name brand alcoholic beverages and cheap beer. Dim fluorescent lights kept the
room mostly in shadows, which was for the best: interiors of most condemned buildings looked
better. It was an ugly concrete room with dirty floors and a ceiling that was crumbling apart and
walls that were cracked and needed replastering. The only items decorating the walls were a
broken Budweiser sign and a dingy mirror that badly needed cleaning and was hung behind the
bar. It was the type of place Carol had become intimate with over the last three years, a place for
alcoholics, drug addicts and degenerates. No one else would have any reason to drink there.
Other than Carol there were four other people at the bar, another couple of dozen sitting at tables and a few others standing sullenly as they tipped back beer bottles and stared with predatory eyes at the few women in the room. Ever since Carol took a seat at the bar she could feel those predatory eyes boring into the back of her head.

She readjusted herself on her barstool. Thick layers of duct tape had been used to cover the seat where it had been torn, and a piece of the tape had curled up and was prodding her in a sensitive area. She couldn’t help smiling at the thought of that. In a dump like this it would figure. A quick glance to either side of her showed that most of the other barstools had also been repaired with duct tape. Again, no surprise. A lovely establishment; the type of place where furniture got busted up and hastily repaired. The room reeked of stale beer, body odor and despair.

Carol lit a cigarette and blew some smoke from the side of her mouth, anything to get the taste of the room out of her throat. Her face froze as she caught a look of herself in the bar mirror. Under her red wig, her face had a washed out, tired look. Fuck, who could blame her? The guys in the bar, though, weren’t going to pay too much attention to a woman’s face, and Carol’s body, while thin, still looked damn good in a pair of very tight shorts that covered maybe an inch of her thigh and a tank top that exposed her belly along with a diamond stud piercing. Half the men in the place had already tried coming on to her, but she blew them off. She had her eye on one guy in particular; the one that Jim picked out when the two of them were camped out in their car across the street. Jim had good intuition about these things, and the more she watched the guy the more she was convinced Jim was right once again.

The guy, who Carol heard addressed as Duane, was talking to a nearly skeleton-thin woman who had the pale drawn look of a drug addict. As thin and haggard as she was she could’ve been anywhere from thirty to sixty. From what Carol could hear of their conversation, Duane had given her drugs recently and wanted services in lieu of payment, and she just wanted him to get lost—that she already made the mistake of fucking him once and she wasn’t going to do it again. He was a big man with a thick body, and he had a large ham hock-sized hand wrapped around her upper arm. She was trying to break free, but didn’t have a chance. With the way his face darkened, Carol had the impression that he was moments away from dragging the woman to the men’s room to force payment. His voice got too low for Carol to hear what he was saying, and the woman started to look badly scared. While he talked to the woman, he kept leering over at Carol. She caught his eye in the bar mirror and smirked at him. He did kind of a double take, making sure he saw what he thought he saw, then with a wolfish grin pushing up his thick lips, he let go of the woman he had been so intent with seconds before, and walked over to Carol. He stood so his body touched hers. Out of the corner of her eye, Carol could see the other woman glancing back nervously as she fled the bar.

“Cleveland’s got a smoking ban,” he said.

“Is that so?”

She blew smoke toward him. That amused the hell out of him. His grin grew more wolfish and he showed off small corn kernel-sized teeth. She couldn’t believe how small those teeth were, especially given how big the guy was. They were like fucking baby teeth. She couldn’t help smiling at that.

Duane mistook the reason for her smile.

“You see something you like?”

“Maybe.”

He edged closer to her. “You gonna keep smoking?”

“I have to. I have this oral fixation. I have to suck on something.”

He was close enough so that his groin pushed against her thigh. Fuck, she was glad she was breathing in cigarette smoke, otherwise she’d be gagging. The guy smelled like shit—like he had crapped in his pants days ago and never realized it. His breath was almost as putrid.

“How about I give you something else to suck on?” Duane said, his lips set in a heavy leer, his eyes dulling.

She downed the rest of her drink. “Buy me another drink and I’ll suck on that.”

He laughed, but it didn’t come close to reaching his eyes. He waved over the bartender.

“Hank, set this pretty lady with whatever she’s drinking.”

“Tequila,” Carol said.
“Tequila,” Duane repeated.
The bartender gave Carol a wary look. He’d been flirting unsuccessfully with her earlier, and she knew he wanted to warn her not to have anything to do with Duane, but he poured her a fresh shot of tequila and took the ten dollars Duane gave him. The bartender started to make change, but Duane told him to keep it. He kept his attention focused on Carol, and began stroking her thigh with a thick index finger.
“You got one smokin’ body, little lady,” he said.
She gave him a hard smile and blew more smoke in his face. He smiled the way a snake might stare at a small rodent, then took her cigarette from her fingers and flicked it to the floor before stubbing it out with his heel.
“I got something much better for you to suck on,” he said softly, a glint of violence in his eyes. “What do you say, little lady?”
“Charming. You mean right here in front of everyone?”
He laughed, gave a look towards the men’s room. “Nah, no need for a show. You and me can step into my private office. Then we can go back to my place and have us a special little party.”
She gave him a cool look, then reaching for his pants, she pulled his loose fitting chinos out enough so she could dump her shot of tequila in them.
“What the fuck?” he yelped, jumping back a step.
“Go fuck yourself,” Carol told him. “You think buying me a drink gives you the right to ask me to suck you off? I got news for you, asshole, you smell like shit.”
Duane stood frozen for a long few seconds, violence hardening his features.

“Uh, uh, you little bitch,” he said, shaking his head. He grabbed Carol by her upper arm the same as he did the other woman, and started to jerk her off the stool. “The skank ho’ I was going to fuck is gone ‘cause of you, so you’re it. And you know why I smell like shit? Because you’re smelling my dick. I like to fuck little tight bitches like you up the ass so hard that the shit comes pouring out of them. So what’s it going to be, bitch? You going to take it willingly up the butt-hole all night, or do I got to knock your pretty little teeth out and carry you out of here? And if you think anyone here’s gonna give a shit—”

A rifle barrel poked him in the forehead, interrupting him. He let go of Carol and blinked dumbly at the bartender, who stood rigid with the stock of the rifle against his shoulder and one finger tensing on the trigger.

“Leave the lady alone.”

“Hank, what the fuck you doin'? This ain’t none of your business.”

“Fuck you it isn’t. Now get out of here!”

“What, you gonna shoot me, is that it, Hank? You that fucked up in the head?”

“If I have to, Duane, I’ll do it happily. Now get the fuck out!”

Duane grinned savagely, his eyes brightening and showing a mix of bemusement and fury. “You should know better than to fuck with me, Hank. Be seeing you around, dumbass.”

Duane reached for Carol as if he was going to touch her cheek, but the bartender poked him hard between the eyes with the tip of the rifle barrel. Duane lost his footing and stumbled backward, all the while grabbing at his head. He checked his palm to see if he was bleeding, saw that he was and his eyes flashed with rage. He pointed an accusatory finger at the bartender. “You are one dumb fuck. If you think this is over you’re nuts.”

The bartender lowered his rifle so it was aimed at Duane’s crotch. “You better just leave before I make a gelding out of you.”

Duane took a couple of hurried steps away, then turned to show Carol an obscene gesture he made with two fingers and his tongue. After that he slipped out the door. The bartender’s hands shook as he put the rifle back under the bar. His skin color had dropped to a milk-white.

“Was the rifle loaded?” Carol asked.

The bartender looked sick to his stomach. He nodded.

“Too bad you didn’t shoot that asshole.”

“Yeah, I probably should’ve.” He showed Carol a queasy smile. “I think you could use a drink, huh?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He poured Carol a shot of tequila on the house and pulled on his lower lip as he watched her drink it.

“It probably wouldn’t be a bad idea for you to leave before he comes back,” he said. “You want I should call you a cab?”

Carol shook her head. “I’m staying only a couple of blocks from here,” she said. She reached out and touched the bartender’s arm, all the weariness in her face fading into a kind of melancholy. At that moment she was absolutely breathtaking. “Thanks for being my protector.” She slid off the barstool and headed towards the exit. The room went silent as everyone in the place stopped to watch her. The bartender broke the silence by yelling out to her that he wanted to call her a cab. “That psycho’s probably out there waiting for you,” he said.

“I’ll be fine,” Carol told him.

“Let me at least walk you home then.”

“That’s really not necessary, but thanks.”

Carol waved to him as she left the bar.

She knew the bartender was right, that Duane would be out there waiting for her. She had done this enough times to know that, and besides, Jim’s intuition with these things was almost never wrong. She walked briskly away from the bar. It didn’t take long before she could feel Duane’s presence and imagine the soft padding of his running shoes as he raced to catch up to her. Good. This was what Jim needed before he could feed and, just as badly, this was what she needed. She needed to be brought back to that moment of helplessness from three years ago when that punk scumbag ripped off her clothes so he could bend her over and violate her. She needed that feeling so she’d have no remorse for Duane, and more importantly, so she could enjoy what was going to happen to him.

When she reached the next alleyway, Duane emerged from the shadows and rushed forward, overpowering her. He dragged her into the darkened alley. His filthy hand covered her mouth and muffled what were half-hearted screams for help. If he listened more carefully he would’ve realized the noises were more of a hysterical laugh.

“You fucking bitch ho’,” he whispered, his lips against her ear, his breath hot and smelling like spoiled cat food. She fought hard to keep from throwing up. She put up only a token resistance as he dragged her deeper into the alley and whispered to her all the things he was going to do to her, how he was going to leave her for the rats after he was done and how that shot of tequila was going to turn out to be the most fucking expensive drink she ever
had a guy buy for her. This was what she needed to hear to get the white hot rage burning inside. She needed to hate this piece of shit enough to be at peace with what was going to happen. Some bleeding hearts would argue that what she and Jim were doing was entrapment, but fuck them. She did nothing to warrant this animal trying to rape her and worse, and if it wasn’t her it would’ve been some other woman being victimized. Fuck him, fuck everyone who might shed a tear over what was going to happen to this piece of scum, she was going to love every second of what was coming.

It came fast. Duane had thrown her to the ground and was pulling his foot back to kick her in the head when the bottom half of his face exploded into a pink spray. There was nothing left—mouth, jaw, chin, all of it gone. He fell to the pavement like a sack of guts. Carol watched as Jim emerged from the shadows. He bent over Duane’s mostly dead body and used a knife to slit Duane’s throat and drain the dying thug’s blood into a bucket until it was half filled. Just as Carol needed to be brought back to her place of hate and rage, she knew that Jim needed his victims to be predators, and just as importantly, he needed to save her from them. As long as these were bad men stopped in the middle of preying on the weak and innocent, he could justify what he needed to do to survive. Carol watched stone-faced as Duane turned into a corpse, and as Jim satisfied his hunger.

Jim stayed sitting on his haunches long after he finished feeding. He wiped the blood off his face with a towel that he had brought, then remained motionless like some sort of stone gargoyle. After minutes of this, he asked Carol if she were okay.

She nodded, said that she was.

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“Just a few bruises. I’ll live.”

“He almost kicked you,” Jim said glumly.

“But he didn’t. You stopped him before he could.”

Jim nodded, still looking glum, still unable to face Carol.

“I heard the things he whispered to you. I’m so sorry.”

Carol’s face tightened as she was brought back to just a few minutes before. She bent over the dead man’s body and searched his pockets, then counted the money she took out of a tattered and stained billfold.

“All he had was thirty-seven dollars,” she said.

“That’s too bad.”

“Fuck. Yeah it is. We’re going to run out of money in a couple of days.”

“I’ll get us more.”

“I’ll help you.”

He frowned, shook his head. “No need for that. I’m not putting you in any more danger tonight. I’ll do it myself.”

Carol didn’t argue. She knew it would be pointless. Jim stood up, still avoiding looking at her. She reached toward him and took hold of his face with both her hands and forced him to look at her. This had become a ritual for them. After every killing, he’d be overcome with a sense of worthlessness. Seeing him vulnerable like that would only stir up her emotions and make her want to do anything to ease his pain. She was never more attracted to him than right after a killing.

Reluctantly, he met her eyes.

“You did what you had to, Jim,” she said, repeating the same mantra that she did after every killing, but still with only genuine love and caring and feeling in her voice. “He was nothing but scum. He was going to rape another woman before he got interested in me. You stopped him from hurting me. He’s not worth suffering any guilt over, no more than if you had killed a rabid dog.”

Jim’s eyes softened as he smiled weakly at her, not because he believed her, but thankful for the effort. The two of them embraced with Carol’s thin arms squeezing Jim as hard as she could. Her mouth searched for his, but he pulled back. He didn’t want her tasting the dead thug’s blood, nor did he want to risk her picking up any diseases.

“After I clean up,” he promised her.

It was several hours later that Jim walked into a biker bar a few miles upriver from The Flats. There were maybe fifty Harleys parked out front, and the place was crowded with a mostly even mix of men and women. A live band covering Grand Funk Railroad songs from the 70s played on a small stage. Before finding the bar, Jim had brought Carol back to their motel, showered off the blood that had splattered on him and had changed into some clean clothes. He also used Listerine and, convinced it was now safe, embraced Carol before he left with a long passionate kiss. She still wanted to go with him, but he convinced her that it would be better if he went alone.

He squeezed through the crowd to the bar and ordered a Bud that he wasn’t going to be drinking, then found an inconspicuous spot to stand and watch the activity around him. It didn’t take long to spot the drug dealer supplying the room; if the guy wasn’t a drug dealer he had a serious bladder problem with the number of trips he
made to the men’s room. He wore a black leather jacket, faded jeans and storm trooper boots, and had gang-style
tattoos decorating his neck and shaved skull. Hooded grinning skulls wrapped in barbed wire, winged dragons and
Chinese letters. He probably would’ve been good looking if he let his hair grow over his tattoos and his face hadn’t
been scarred by a fire. Other guys in the bar would seek him out, and after a brief discussion, they’d head to the
men’s room. The drug dealer was a big guy, but two much bigger guys dressed the same and with the same pattern
of tattoos on their shaved skulls followed him into the men’s room for each transaction.

Jim waited until the drug dealer was approached by another buyer, then made a beeline to the men’s room.
The band was playing Some Kind of Wonderful and the place was lively with all the attention turned toward the
stage. Jim snaked through the crowd unnoticed. He found an empty stall and crouched on the toilet seat, sitting on
his heels. A couple of minutes later a small crowd entered the men’s room. From the crack in the stall door, Jim saw
the money and drugs trade hands. The customer left first while the drug dealer stayed behind to add more money to
his roll.

In a fluid panther-like motion, Jim sprung forward, pulling himself head first through the three-foot opening
between the stall and the ceiling, and landing inches behind the drug dealer. Before the dealer could react, Jim
banged his head off the sink. It all happened in the blink of an eye. The sound of the blow made only a dull thud, but
it was enough to get one of the bodyguards turning around.

“What the fuck—” the bodyguard started. Before he could finish his thought, Jim clanged his head off his
partner’s. The bodyguard slid to the floor. His partner, though, wobbled on his feet, and stared groggily at Jim.

“You’re a fucking dead man,” he mumbled, his words coming out like a punch-drunk boxer’s. He reached
clumsily inside his leather jacket, but before he could do anything else, Jim grabbed him by the collar and head
banged him hard enough to knock him out. Using one hand he half-lifted and half-dragged the guy to the empty stall
and propped him on the toilet so he was sitting up. Jim stood back and gave the man a hard stare. He didn’t like the
fact that the guy had gotten a look at him, but fuck it, getting his head clanged the way he did probably left him too
groggy to see straight. Besides, Jim didn’t plan on staying in Cleveland long, and as much as the world would be a
better place without these three, it wasn’t his call. He left to get the other bodyguard, stacked him on top of the first,
then did the same with the drug dealer. He locked the stall from the inside and slid under the opening at the bottom.
Glancing under the stall he could only make out one pair of legs.

The drug dealer’s roll lay on the floor. Jim took off the rubber band holding it together and counted over nine
thousand dollars. More than enough to keep him and Carol going for months.

A window opened up into an alleyway in back of the bar. Jim went through it and disappeared into the night.

Chapter 5

Faces of the perverts and rapists and sociopaths that Jim had killed over the last three years blurred in his
mind into something generic, something almost cartoonish. Outside of that first thug who attacked Carol in Newark,
it was hard for him to recall any of them. Even the latest one from only several hours before. Their faces just kept
goading in and out, never quite coming into focus. He forced himself to concentrate, to try to picture what at least one
of them looked like, but couldn’t do it. Whenever he came close, the image would morph into Bluto from those old
Popeye cartoons. Giving up, he forced himself to count how many of these predators he had killed since hooking up
with Carol. It took a while but he came up with a number—a hundred and ten, plus the two vampires that Serena had
sicced on him. Fuck. If this kept up and he lived to a ripe old age he could go down as one of the deadliest serial
killers in history, or the most successful vigilante, depending on your point of view. The fact that these were all
violent sociopathic thugs, the worst that humanity had to offer, only slightly helped to ease his conscience. No
matter how hard he tried convincing himself otherwise, it still came down to that he was robbing them of any chance
of redemption. Even though he had to kill them for his survival, he probably wouldn’t be able to do it if they weren’t
trying to hurt Carol. Not that he hadn’t killed before becoming a vampire.

Yeah, he had killed more than his share before that…
Shit, maybe even more than since his infection…
His thoughts drifted back to his days during the First Gulf War when he had been a member of a special forces
unit that was taking out command and communication bunkers in Western Iraq. This was during the first wave of
bombings when the Iraqi Republican Guard were buried deep underground. His team blew their way into those
bunkers, tossed down tear gas canisters, then Jim would lead the charge. He was good at what he did and killed most
of them himself before the other members of his team could get in on the action. Afterwards they would collect
whatever intel they could find and blow up what was left inside. He killed a lot of Iraqis during those first few days,

After his stint in the army, he wandered aimlessly for the next eight years. For a while he took whatever odd
jobs came his way; short order cook, bartender, bouncer, fisherman, lumberjack, even a short time as a bodyguard for one of Hollywood’s leading divas, but he couldn’t stay put in any one place for too long. He couldn’t sleep at night and was too antsy during the day to be able to concentrate on anything. After a few months in one place, the pressure inside would get to where he felt like he couldn’t breathe, like he had a knife pressed against his heart. He’d have to move then. After six years of this, he stopped giving a shit altogether. He stopped working and instead started doing smash and grabs, burglaries and purse snatches for his drinking money. Nothing too violent, but still enough too leave him filled with even more self-loathing. A short time later he started worshipping the needle and the release that gave him. The heroin numbed him out and kept him from slicing his wrists each night. For almost a year after that he was in freefall, and by all rights he should’ve ended up dead, contracting AIDS or in prison for a good five to ten year stretch, and if it wasn’t for a chance encounter in Austin, Texas, one of those fates probably would’ve happened.

That day started off worse than most of the others. He had hooked up the night before with another addict, a deathly thin blonde woman about twenty years older than him. He didn’t remember much about her other than how damn hollow her eyes looked, how her lips were so unnaturally pale with this hint of blue tingeing them and hard it was for her to find a vein to tap. When he woke up the next morning she was gone along with his roll of over three grand and his stash. There was nothing in her apartment worth any money. She wasn’t coming back. His cash and junk were long gone. He was just lucky she didn’t take his clothes, and even luckier she didn’t take his army-issued boots. He sat on the floor for a long time holding his head, needing a fix as badly as he ever did. Eventually the stench of garbage got to him and he staggered out of the apartment.

Most of what happened that day was lost to him, but he remembered that night ending up in a diner. He tried to palm a couple of bucks from the counter and that was when a burly tattooed arm went around his shoulder, corralling him.

“Hey, buddy, I think that was left behind for that pretty little waitress over there working her tail off. What do you say you put it back?”

It was said in a soft friendly rumbling tone, and the man saying it was the size of a small grizzly. Long beard, long dirty blonde hair, sunburned face, and wire-rimmed sunglasses that looked like gray coins placed on the eyes of a dead man. The man peered at Jim, who was wearing one of his old military camouflage shirts.

“You in Desert Storm?” he asked.

“Yeah, special forces.”

The man nodded. “Third Armored Division. Spent some time there myself. Why don’t you put that little gal’s tip back and join me and my friends for some dinner. My treat.”

Jim put the money back on the counter. The man introduced himself as Big Daddy Larkin. Three guys and a long-haired slender gal with granny-style sunglasses and a wicked off-balance smile sat at the table, all members of Big Daddy’s rock band. The band’s name was the Walking Wounded and tried for a mix of Southern Rock and heavy metal. Allman Brothers meets AC/DC was the way Big Daddy described it. He played base, the girl, Elise, sang, and the three other guys—all Desert Storm vets also—played instrumentals. Big Daddy explained the name of the band by tapping on his leg and showing Jim that it was a prosthetic. The drummer, Kyle, was missing a hand. Stevie and Danny, who played electric guitar and keyboard, were also each missing a leg. Jim, as he listened, tried hard to keep from shivering.

“You need a fix pretty bad, huh?” Big Daddy observed.

Jim nodded.

“Can’t help you there. We’re mostly drug-free, do a little weed, but not much more than that. Why don’t we get some coffee in you in the meantime.”

Big Daddy signaled the waitress over and had her pour a cup of high octane for Jim. He ordered Jim some scrambled eggs and bacon, along with a stack of pancakes, and had her leave the pot of coffee behind.

“We’ll see if your stomach can hold down some food,” he said with a wink to Jim after the waitress left.

Jim poured a heavy dose of sugar in his coffee and sipped it slowly.

“Fuck, I hope so,” he said.

Elise was sitting next to Jim. She rubbed a small hand gently across his back. Big Daddy considered him thoughtfully.

“Our band manager took off when we were in Dallas last week. We need a new one, and with the theme of our band, I think you’d fit right in. Looking for a job?”

Jim smiled weakly. “I didn’t lose any body parts over there.”

“Maybe not, but you lost something.”

Jim ended up accepting the job. The next three days were hard ones, and he spent most of the time curled up on rubber sheets while he sweated, vomited and cramped out his addiction. He half-remembered Elise being there a
lot, wiping off his forehead with a cold compress, cleaning the vomit off his face and feeding him soup and apple juice.

After those three days Jim was shaky but able to stand on his feet. “Damn good thing,” Big Daddy grumbled. “We’ve got a show tonight. About time you got off your ass and pulled your weight.”

His job as band manager turned out to be doing everything except playing on stage. He moved the instruments from the van to the stage and back, booked the club dates and hotels, collected their pay, bought their weed, among dozens of other small chores. The job didn’t pay much but it had more than its share of perks. Elise was cute as hell with a singing voice that brought a lump to his throat. Her and Big Daddy were an item, which was okay with Jim. He just enjoyed her company, and overnight thought of her as a younger sister, and fuck, Big Daddy and the other guys in the band as his brothers. They all shared the same experience of being over there—or in Elise’s case, having her fiancée over there and killed in Dhahran. Each of them had lost a piece of themselves, and more important, had survived what they lost. For whatever it was worth, they saved his life. To say he would’ve taken a bullet for any of them would’ve been an understatement.

Every four or five days Jim would pack them up and they’d travel to the next city and their next club date. The constant moving around was good for him. It kept him from feeling antsy and from having the pressure inside build up too much. He started sleeping better and his nightmares were mostly gone. There were some nights where he’d find himself blissfully out of it for as much as six hours. For the first time in a long time he was relaxing and having fun. His biggest kick came when the band performed a song he wrote and the audience went wild over it, including several pantys being thrown onstage. Big Daddy brought him up with the rest of the band to take a bow. After that he worked on more songs with Big Daddy and Elise. It was the best time of his life, and not just because of the music and the sex-crazed groupies and the free lifestyle. Big Daddy and Elise and the rest of the band had become his family in a way that his alcoholic parents and the army never were.

Three and a half years ago they had a club date in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. A little hole in the wall basement nightclub that could hold maybe a hundred people, and somehow managed to squeeze in twice that amount to hear them. Elise was on fire that night and the band was hitting on all cylinders. Normally it would’ve been one of those magical nights where as band manager Jim would be able to just sit back and enjoy the ride, but he couldn’t concentrate on the music. Not with this wild looking dame standing maybe twenty feet from him. And not with the way she was staring at him. Jesus, she was something, sexy as hell in a matching yellow skintight leather pants and vest that left little to the imagination. Narrow hips and long legs and green eyes that could’ve been lasers the way they pierced through him. He wouldn’t exactly say she was gorgeous—she had this weird cat-like look about her, but every time he’d look over and meet her eyes and catch her thin impish smile, he’d feel himself growing as hard as a brick between his legs. It was embarrassing, and he couldn’t explain it. He tried not to look in her direction. His sixth sense told him to stay the fuck away. He found himself sweating, tensing, praying that she’d keep her distance. A hand touched his shoulder, then the feel of her lips brushing against his ear. It froze him. She whispered her name to him, told him that she had her eye on him for the longest time and that she was completely mesmerized by him. He knew she was mocking him, but her being so close to him left his head pounding.

He followed her to the club manager’s office. Maybe she paid the manager to leave, maybe she asked him politely, or maybe something else had happened, but whatever, the office was empty. Once the door closed she was on him, her legs wrapping around his thighs, her hands ripping his shirt as if it were tissue paper. If he were thinking clearly he’d realize that what she was doing to his shirt was reason enough to bolt the hell out of there, but his blood was pounding too hard in his head for rational thought. He barely even realized it when she worked him out of his jeans. Next they were on the hardwood floor, her nails digging into his shoulders and her tongue probing deep down his throat. His own skin had become so feverish that he only faintly realized how cold to the touch her flesh was. In a way it felt good, her lips like ice as they cooled him. Blindly, he freed her from her leather pants, and then she was on him, pushing him inside of her and bucking like a wild animal, her eyes rolling inwards until only the whites could be seen. She rode him like that until he thought he was going to pass out, all the while her moaning rising to something obscene. Shuddering as if she’d been shot, she collapsed on him but continuing to writhe across his body, her nails clawing at him, her tongue riding up his chest and towards his neck, all the while licking the blood from his scratches.

The touch of her tongue made his skin crawl.

He was in ecstasy.

He was in agony.

She bit him at the base of his neck.

“What the fuck?”

The shock of the bite brought him out of his trance. He tried to push her off him, but her arms held him like steel bands. He couldn’t believe how strong she was. Panic set in, but as hard as he fought, she held him down with
ease as if he were only a rag doll. Her teeth sunk deeper into his flesh. It only took minutes before the infection came, then the sickness rolled over him.

Christ, it was bad. Her heroin withdrawal was like heaven on earth compared to the sickness. Serena’s posse must’ve carried him out of the club and taken him to her converted hotel in Union Square, at least that’s probably what happened, because he had no memory of it. The only thing he could remember clearly about the next twenty-four hours was the intense agony he went through. It was unlike anything imaginable—as if every fiber of his body was on fire and being pulled apart. How he, or any of the other vampires, survived the infection stage without going insane was beyond him. Only fragments of that time stuck in his consciousness. The swatches that survived in his brain were things from a horror movie. Images fading in and out. Him in wrist and ankle restraints. Being fed blood through a baby bottle. Him greedily sucking on it, his throat so damn dry as if it had been burnt with a flame. The vampire who he would later learn was Metcalf arguing with Serena about him, claiming she had no right to infect anyone without his permission, and her insisting she had every right to her toys. Metcalf appearing with a samurai sword and slicing off the legs of one of her posse, telling her that he needed to maintain the status quo. Those legs that were sliced off continuing to move on their own while Metcalf cut off the vampire’s arms, then carrying away what was left, the whole time the bloody thing screaming like a banshee.

The fever broke. Consciousness seeped in and he became aware of where he was and what was happening to him. God, he hurt. Especially his throat. Fuck, he was hungry.

A familiar woman’s voice, soft and amused, commented, “The butterfly has broken free from its cocoon.”

Blinking, he craned his neck. Serena sat naked on a chaise lounge pleasuring herself. He realized he was naked also, and even in his pain, felt himself growing hard.

She got off the chaise lounge. She noticed his erection and smiled thinly at him.

“Yes, my pet. How very observant of you.”

“What type?”

“‘What type do you think?’

At some level he wanted to gag, but at a deeper more fundamental level, all he wanted was to drink more blood. His wrists and ankles were still manacled. As he lay helpless, she crawled on him so that her pubic area pressed against his mouth, then started to fellate him.

He tried not to breathe in that sickly-sweet scent of hers.

He tried hard not to taste her.

Fuck, he wanted to throw her off him.

More than anything, though, he didn’t want her to stop.

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine that it was a different woman than Serena on him. He tried to think of his old high school girlfriend, and that he was someplace else entirely. It didn’t work. All he could think about was Serena and that night in the SoHo nightclub. About her biting him and the intense sickness that came afterwards. He knew he had changed. He could feel the difference in his body. He had seen on waking that he had become leaner and more narrow. He could feel that his head had changed shape. In his mind’s eye he could picture what he now looked like. At some level he knew what he had turned into. The word vampire kept bumping through his brain. He didn’t want to think about it. He tried not to think about it… He tried not to want Serena as much as he did…

Christ, he was hungry. Without even realizing it he had bit the inside of her thigh. It took a lot of effort to break the skin, and he just kept biting down harder, and it made her squirm and suck harder on him. Finally he broke the skin. He licked up the drops of blood that formed from her wound. A violent intense spasm wracked his body. For a long moment he couldn’t breathe. His body became so tense he couldn’t move. Then he started gagging.

Serena had rolled off him.

“If it was only that easy,” she said, sighing. “We can’t feed off of infected blood, my pet.”

She waited until he stopped gagging. Then caressing his cheek, asked, “Are you feeling better now?”

Jim nodded, his face contorted into a tight grimace.

“Good. You can bite me all you want. I like it. But if I bleed, don’t lick my blood. It’s not good for you.”
It didn’t take much effort on her part to bring back his erection. And then she was back to what she’d been doing, although with more excitement. Right before he was about to climax, he could feel the violence of her being ripped away from him. He opened his eyes and saw that Metcalf had a grip of her long black hair and was pulling her off the table.

“You son of a bitch!” she swore at him as she tried to pull free. Metcalf let her fall to the floor.

“Me?” Metcalf asked, grinning, although his eyes were as dull as sand. “For Chrissakes, Serena, can’t you even show an ounce of self control? You know full well we have an indoctrination protocol.”

“Asshole,” she spat.

She rubbed her head gingerly before grabbing a robe lying nearby and covering herself.

Metcalf’s eyelids lowered as he turned to her. She noticed it and moved over to the chaise lounge. Avoiding his stare, she told him to get on with his indoctrination.

“Thank you.”

She didn’t bother to respond, instead curled her fingers on her right hand and studied her nails. Metcalf turned his attention to Jim. He sat down on the edge of the table Jim had been manacled to, and pulled a stiletto knife from his belt. He let Jim get a long look at it.

“This is an incredibly sharp knife,” Metcalf said, admiring it. “You’d be amazed at how sharp this really is and what it could cut.”

Even though he knew what the answer was going to be, Jim couldn’t help himself from asking Metcalf what he was going to do with the knife.

“Only a demonstration,” Metcalf said. He looked bored as he ran his thumb along the edge of the blade. “If my skin were like any normal person’s my thumb would’ve been sliced open to the bone. But it’s not. And you’ve probably noticed you’ve changed also, am I correct?”

Without waiting for a response, Metcalf spun around and plunged the blade into Jim’s chest, and kept pushing downwards until the knife was buried. Jim stared dumbly at it. A low creaking noise escaped from him, then his body jerked into spasms. His back arched as if ten thousand volts were being shot through him.

“Right through the heart,” Metcalf said. “Hurts like hell doesn’t it? If you were normal you’d be dead now. But you’re not. And if you want the pain to stop, you’ll figure it out.”

Jim strained frantically against his chains. One of them snapped, and with his hand free, he pulled the knife out of his body.

“You fucking asshole,” he forced through clenched teeth.

Metcalf got a laugh out of that. “Only proving a point, guy,” he said. “My demo takes a hell of a lot less time than trying to convince you about the changes.”

Serena rolled her eyes. “My dear, Metcalf, I think you do this little demonstration of yours because you’re a sadist. No other reason.”

Any amusement Metcalf had been showing dried up quickly. He glanced impatiently at Jim and ordered him to break himself free of his other chains.

“You’ve got ten seconds to get off that table before I repeat my demonstration.”

Jim snapped the chain restraining his other wrist, then broke the chains attached to his ankles. He pushed himself off the table by the time Metcalf had counted to nine, and stood wobbly for a moment before regaining his balance.

“Why aren’t I dead?” he asked. The searing pain that had been slicing through his chest was now more of a dull ache. He found himself able to talk more normally again. “You stabbed me through the heart. What the fuck have I turned into?”

“What do you think?”

Half under his breath, Jim muttered the V word.

That brought a grim smile from Metcalf. “For your information, that’s a dirty word around here, but no, not in the classic supernatural sense. Thanks to Serena, though, you have been infected with a virus that mimics some of those legends.” He glared at Serena, his mouth shrinking to a small slit. Serena appeared not to notice. She had picked up a file and was nonchalantly sharpening her blood-red painted nails. Metcalf’s eyes dulled as he turned back to Jim. “That’s it for questions. Put some clothes on and follow me so we can finish your indoctrination. I don’t have all fucking day.”

The knife wound had already scabbed over. Only a scar the size of a quarter had been left behind. A pair of khaki draw-string pants and a matching color tee shirt were folded next to the table. Jim slipped them both on. They were several sizes smaller than his normal size, and they hung loosely on him. Metcalf waited impatiently. Serena looked up from her nails to eye the way he looked in the clothes, and licked her lips.

“Where the fuck am I?” Jim asked.
“The place you’re going to spend the rest of your life. Just shut up and follow me.”

The windows in the room had been painted black, as they were in the hallway Metcalf led Jim through. From the layout, the art deco decorations and the antique elevator that they stepped into, Jim’s thought was that this was a converted turn-of-the-century hotel. He had to guess they were still in Manhattan. With the windows darkened and only artificial light filtering through the hallway and rooms, he had no sense of time. It could be midnight or noon for all he knew. He couldn’t shake this image in his head that they were in a large coffin.

Metcalf had them get out at the basement level, and before too long they were stepping into hell. Emaciated men and women sat in cages, each looking withdrawn and defeated. The scene could’ve been snapshots from a Nazi concentration camp. Jim felt a sickening horror as he looked from face to face. None of the captives were able to meet his eyes. Metcalf casually explained that these were the cattle pens.

“What the fuck do you mean by that?”

Metcalf raised an eyebrow at his tone. “I’m giving you this one warning,” he said. “In a few minutes I’ll be making it clear to you what will happen if you raise your voice to me again.” He waved a hand toward the cages. “And before you act all high and mighty, didn’t you think about where the blood came from that Serena fed you earlier?”

Jim shook his head.

“Bullshit.”

“No. There’s no way I could’ve imagined something like this.”

“What did you expect then? That we turn on our faucets and blood pours out instead of tap water? Sorry, guy, it doesn’t work that way. But I’ll tell you what. If you’re so offended by this, you don’t have to drink the blood we milk for you. You can starve if you want—”

“I don’t get it. Why human blood?”

Metcalf smiled cruelly. “You want to try eating something else, you name it, sport. Steak, pizza, chocolate, anything you want, and I’ll get it for you. We’ll see how well you do with it. But all that’s besides the point. This isn’t why I brought you down here.”

Metcalf continued to the opposite end of the room where he unlocked a door and beckoned Jim to join him, a grim smile showing as Jim approached.

“This is my private lab. If you’re smart this will be the only time you get a chance to see it.”

Metcalf turned on the overhead lights. The inside of the lab was a chamber of horrors. What at first looked like grotesque armless mannequins cut off at the waist turned out to be living beings. Some were chained to the walls, others had spikes driven through their shoulder pinning them to tables. A few were sliced open as if they were in the midst of being dissected, but even these were still alive. They all seemed to be in agony.

“I use this lab to study the limits of our infection,” Metcalf said, his lips pursed with amusement as he observed Jim’s reaction to the room and its inhabitants. “It serves other purposes as you can probably guess. There’s one thing in particular here that I’d like to show you.”

He brought Jim to an empty area at a lab table between two of the dissection experiments. Jim caught the eye of one of the partially dissected vampires. It mewled softly to him before looking away.

“Any idea what this is for?” Metcalf asked.

Jim couldn’t keep himself from nodding.

“Yeah? Let’s hear it.”

Jim started to answer him, closed his mouth.

“Superstitious, huh?” Metcalf asked. “You’re afraid to say it? Okay, I’ll say it for you. This spot’s reserved for the next resident here who pisses me off.”

“It looked to me like Serena was doing a good job of that.”

A glaze fell over Metcalf’s eyes. “She has her privileges, but you sure as fuck don’t. If I were you I’d watch my mouth. Understand?”

Something about the way Metcalf was staring at him told Jim he was seconds away from being made one of his experiments. As shaky as he was feeling he knew he’d have no chance against this vampire. Maybe if he was feeling stronger and had a knife, he’d have a shot, but not now.

“Yeah,” Jim said, his eyes shifting downwards and away from Metcalf.

“So what did you learn here?”

“Don’t piss me off.”

Metcalf nodded. “Congratulations. You pass your indoctrination and get to walk out of this room. Not all of our new recruits can say that. Now get the fuck out so I can get to work.” He sniffed and glanced sideways at Jim as he was leaving. “I’m sure Serena will fill you in on the rest of our rules, but before that don’t try to do something stupid like leave this building. You do, we’ll hunt you down and I’ll make you one of my very special projects.”
During the next five months Jim played along. At first he refused the blood being offered him, and to the amusement of the other vampires accepted Metcalf’s offer for other food—first trying fresh fruit and vegetables, then fish, and finally cow’s blood, and each time paying a heavy price, the reaction being the same as when he had tried licking up drops of Serena’s blood. After several days of this he was left near crazed with hunger and drank what Serena brought to him. He tried hard not to think about where it came from. Instead he did what he had to during those five months to survive, including putting on an act of complete submissiveness. The reality was his survival instincts had kicked into full drive. It was like he was back in Iraq, moving silently among the enemy and gathering whatever intelligence he could. During that time he avoided Metcalf as much as possible—not that it was that difficult given how that psycho son of a bitch spent most of his waking hours playing in his lab.

He had been right about the building being a converted hotel, and also about it’s location—it turned out to be in the heart of Union Square. After a month of being cooped up inside of this glorified tomb, Serena took him clubbing with her and her posse. By this point he had become more than just her sex toy. While she was still engaging in orgies with her posse, she was spending her nights alone with Jim, confiding secrets, and at times even appearing vulnerable. He knew this special treatment didn’t play well with the other members of her inner circle, especially Zach, and he was careful when he was alone with them. When they went out clubbing, Serena spent less time eyeing other men, and mostly focused on Jim, whispering in his ear and rubbing her body against his. His own feelings towards her were a mix of hate and lust. As much as he was disgusted by her, she could make him hard simply by looking at him. Sex with her was always a thrill ride, and he kept his true feelings about her hidden.

After five months he was satisfied with the intelligence he collected, and when he had his next opportunity to escape, he took it. Like every night when they went out clubbing, Serena and her posse doped themselves up first with heroin, and that night they snorted extra lines and were more lethargic than usual. At the club, Zach was brooding over some imagined slight, which attracted Serena’s attention enough for Jim to slip away. He left through a back door and kept running until he was out of Manhattan and crossing over the Queensboro bridge into Long Island City. The first night he spent in a condemned tenement building. He could hear the rats squealing as they fled. After that night he found a studio apartment off of Queens Boulevard to rent. The place was a dump, but it didn’t matter. The cockroaches and other pests emptied out of it within seconds of him showing up. Besides, he didn’t expect to be there long.

During his time in the vampire hotel, or tomb, as he had come to think of the place, he had worked out some initial plans of how he was going to free the “cattle” being held in the basement, and destroy Serena, Metcalf, and the other vampires living there. He knew that while it was difficult to kill an infected person, it was possible. With enough explosive force he would be able to blow off their limbs, and then cut off their heads as they lay helpless. The plan he worked out was basically a suicide mission, which was okay with him as long as it left the other vampires dead. Hell, he always thought he left Iraq with one last mission left in him. The only piece of intel that he was missing that bothered him was the source of the infection. He never was able to identify whether the virus started with Serena, Metcalf, or a third party, and he would’ve liked to have known that when he was done the virus had been fully eradicated. But he was going to have to leave this one loose end.

He had taken twenty grand from Serena the night he went on the run. As far as Serena was concerned money was of no object and that twenty grand was nothing but loose change to her. One of the residents of the tomb was a billionaire founder of a dot-com company whom she had infected so she could make him transfer all of his assets to her. Now that he was in Queens, Jim was using most of the twenty grand to purchase explosives, but it didn’t go nearly as far as he had hoped. He needed more money to carry out his plan, and he started searching out drug dealers to rob. They were easy. He didn’t kill them, but he roughed them up and took their money.

He had blueprints for the hotel, and was close to having what he needed when one night while wiring up bombs, the door to his studio apartment was kicked in and standing outside were two vampires. They were thicker and darker than the other vampires he had seen, but he knew from the shape of their heads that they were infected. He didn’t recognize them, but he didn’t know all of the residents of the tomb. It was also possible Serena infected them to send after him—she had no qualms about infecting people to get what she needed. Jim would later learn from the newspapers that that was what happened—that these two were Mafia hit men who were missing for ten days before showing up at his studio apartment. They were both carrying big-ass pistols that Jim would later learn from the newspapers that that was what happened—that these two were Mafia hit men who were missing for ten days before showing up at his studio apartment.

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The vampire had been blinded by the smoke and dust, and was trying to stagger away on his stumps. Jim used a piece of metal as a makeshift sword. The first swing went a few inches into the vampire’s neck. It took a half dozen more swings before he had the head mostly cut off. Before he could pull his makeshift sword loose, he was tackled from behind and found himself rolling among the rubble with the other hit man.

“I got nothin’ against you, buddy,” the vampire grunted as it struggled to point the barrel of gun at Jim’s mouth. “I’m just doing a job, so do me a favor and fucking die already.”

He had pressed the barrel against Jim’s neck, but either he was out of bullets or the gun had jammed because nothing happened when he pulled the trigger. He started to give the gun a pissed off look, but before he could do much else, Jim had flipped him over. While they had been rolling around Jim found one of his hand grenades. He pinched the hit man’s nostrils shut. When the vampire opened his mouth to breathe, Jim shoved the grenade in, pulled the pin, counted, then rolled off.

The blast knocked him over. It also took off enough of the vampire’s head to kill it. Sirens were approaching. Jim got up and ran before anyone could stop him. Hours later he was in Newark, and a few days later he found Carol. After that his plans changed.

* * * * *

Carol had the TV set on. The motor lodge offered fourteen cable channels, along with pay per view porn. She couldn’t find MTV, and after flipping through the channels several times and finding nothing of interest, she left it on a religious program. It didn’t matter what was on, she just wanted the background noise, anything to block out the squealing of bedsprings from the neighboring room.

After her first few weeks together with Jim, he bought her a lady’s handgun, a Smith & Wesson .38 caliber revolver. It was funny that it was considered a lady’s handgun since it still had enough firepower to stop a two hundred and fifty pound NFL linebacker in his tracks. It wasn’t pink, and it didn’t have little hearts decorating it, but Carol figured it was because the gun could fit in her purse and only weighed twenty ounces. Whenever she helped Jim lure a predator to feed on, he always insisted that she bring her gun along in case he lost track of her. She now had the gun laying on the bed and stared transfixed at it for what seemed like an eternity, all the while an evangelical preacher from the TV rambled on about how Jesus suffered each day for their sins and if the good people listening could only dig deep into their hearts, and even deeper into their wallets, the lord’s pain could be eased. A hardness froze Carol’s face. Earlier she had cracked open the cylinder and dumped the bullets onto the bed sheet.

Almost from the beginning she’d been wanting Jim to infect her so they could go through this together. Wasn’t that what true love was all about—to share everything each other went through, the good and the bad? He refused to, though, saying that their life together always on the move was difficult enough; that at least if Carol were uninfected she’d be able to drive during the day and run the other errands they needed. She didn’t buy his explanation. They could move from city to city just as easily at night. She knew he was trying to protect her from what he was going through, but as far she was concerned, that wasn’t good enough. She wanted him to share his pain with her. If they were really each other’s soul mates, there shouldn’t be anything between them.

She picked up the revolver. For something that only weighed twenty ounces, it felt heavy in her hand. She slid a bullet into one of the chambers, then spun the cylinder.

If Jim came back and found her dying, he would have to infect her to save her life. No matter all the things that he’d said to the contrary, he would have to save her.

* * * * *

Carol, he’d tell her in that tired voice of his he’d fall into whenever they had this argument, you don’t know what you’re asking me. This is not something I could ever let you go through. Fuck, I can’t think of a worse curse to wish on anyone, let alone something that I would ever inflict on someone I loved with all my heart. Please, let it drop, it’s never going to happen.

Bullshit. If he really loved her as much as he claimed he did, how could he ever let her leave him?

She pushed the muzzle of the gun against her belly, felt the coldness of the steel. There were five chambers. Four empty, one with a .38 caliber bullet. A twenty percent chance. Her muscles tensed as she squeezed the trigger. An empty click, nothing else.

Oh, fuck.

She almost vomited the shots of tequila and greasy burger and fries from before. Somehow she kept it all down.

If he really loved her he would save her. No matter what else, he would have to save her. If the situation were reversed, she wouldn’t think twice. She spun the cylinder again, hearing the metallic clicks. Again, she pushed the muzzle hard against her bare belly. The preacher was rambling on about how Christ loved all of them. She started laughing. It sounded like something that could’ve been coming out of a wounded animal.

Christ loved her, huh? What about Jim? Did he love her enough? Could he let her die?

Her face hardened with resolve. If he could then she didn’t want to fucking live.
Calmly, her hand steady, she squeezed the trigger. Another empty click. This time, though, everything in her stomach came rushing up, and she made a dash for the bathroom. It all came out quickly, easily. Minutes afterwards, her stomach empty and swollen, she gargled with mouthwash, then stood at the bathroom sink splashing cold water over her face. She avoided looking at her reflection in the mirror. She didn’t want to see what she looked like, but could imagine her eyes rimmed with red and her skin waxy and unnaturally pale. Headlights from outside flashed through the room, then died. Carol grabbed one of the threadbare towels from a rusted metal bar and wiped her face dry. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and broke out giggling at how drawn and tired she looked. She was out of the bathroom and still giggling when Jim opened the motel room door. Their eyes locked for a moment, then she stumbled forward and buried her face in his chest and held him as tight as she could and tried to hide that she was now sobbing.

He put an arm around her thin shoulders and ran a hand through her hair.
“Are you crying or laughing?” he asked in a soft whisper.
“A little of both. Oh fuck, I’m glad you’re back.”
She buried her face deeper into his chest and started laughing more than she was sobbing. Jim lifted her chin upwards and kissed her gently on the mouth. As he pulled away, he gave her a wary look.
“Why is your gun on the bed?” he asked.
“No good reason… just for protection.” She paused, wiping a hand across her eyes. “I thought I heard someone at the door earlier. I probably imagined it. You know, we are in a pretty shitty neighborhood.”
He glanced sideways at the bed, asked her why she had taken four of the bullets out.
“What? Oh, nothing too mysterious. I was cleaning the gun, that’s all. I just finished when you came back and was reloading.”
She knew he didn’t buy her story. In the three years they’d been together, he had always been the one to clean the gun. Before he could ask her any more questions about the bullets, she took hold of his right hand and brought it to her lips and kissed it. It was like kissing ice, but it didn’t matter to her.
“What if some creep had broken in here?” she asked. “What if you came back here and found me dying?”
“Please, Carol…”
“No. Tell me. What would you do?”
He broke free of her and walked over to the bed to collect the loose bullets. He turned away unable to meet her stare.
“Now’s not a good time to talk about this.” He took the drug dealer’s money roll out of his pocket and tossed it on the night table next to the bed. “I had a good night. Over nine grand.”
“Jim, you have to tell me. What would you do?”
He still couldn’t look at her. “What I had to,” he said.
Her legs gave out from under her. It was as if someone had gashed her Achilles heel and her strength bled out instead of blood. Jim rushed over to her before she fell and carried her to the bed.
“Are you okay?” he asked, a worried frown creasing his face.
“Please, Hon, tell me you would save me.”
A sadness filled Jim’s pale grays. Carol’s own eyes were liquid. He nodded. “I would save you,” he said.
Carol pulled him close, kissing him hard on the mouth, her tongue slipping in to touch his. He pulled back as gently as he could.
“Let me wash off the grime from the street first,” he said.
She shook her head. She wasn’t going to let go. He accepted that and let her pull him back to her. Before he knew it they were melting into each other. There was so much passion in her it damn near broke his heart. She was like a narcotic to him, and he let himself get swallowed up by it. At that moment the universe was only the two of them. Barely even aware of it, she was guiding him inside of her. It just seemed like the most natural thing in the world, and as much as he hated to break the spell, he pulled away to put protection on. Then they were back together, his head swimming in the narcotic haze she induced, and her small slender body so feverish that it almost warmed his own body up to a temperature just above that of a corpse.

He didn’t lie to her before. If it ever came down to it, he would save her. Even if it meant losing her—which nothing in the world could be more painful for him—he would save her from ever being infected.
He tried hard not to think about why she removed those bullets and left a single one in a chamber. Christ, he didn’t want to picture what she was doing alone with that gun, or worse, what she thought she needed him to prove.
He closed his eyes and let himself be swallowed up by her heat. There was so much of it.

Chapter 6
It was a quarter past three in the morning when Metcalf eased a stolen Chrysler LeBaron into Dr. Ravi Panjubar's driveway. At that hour it wasn't pitch-black, more of a murky grayness, but not enough sunlight to cause any discomfort. Metcalf waited in the car while Bronson cut the electricity to the house, then he got out and stretched before meeting the other vampire by the front door. It had been a six-hour drive to Palo Alto and his muscles had tightened up. He glanced at the other vampire and then at the window panes on the door. When he lifted a fist to punch out one of the panes, Bronson stopped him.

"There are kids' bikes in the garage," Bronson said.

Metcalf turned a dead-eyed stare on the vampire. "So?"

"Why make this a slaughter? Give me five minutes. I'll go in first and tie everyone up."

"You got to be fucking kidding me."

"All I'm asking for is five minutes. What's the big deal?"

"Christ. All that is is cattle in there."

"Five minutes. Please."

Metcalf's eyes dimmed. "Two minutes," he said.

The vampire nodded, then started scaling the outside of the house to the roof, moving quickly and in a manner that made Metcalf think of a squirrel. Metcalf set a timer on his watch, then looked up and watched as Bronson pried open a skylight and slipped inside. Within seconds he heard the anguished high-pitch wail of a dog. Before the timer on his watch went off, Bronson opened the front door and let him in.

"They have a dog," Bronson said.

"No shit."

"No shit. A German Shepherd. What a beautiful animal. I left it cowering in the bedroom. I hate seeing them like that. Anyway, here's the good doctor."

He stepped aside to show Dr. Ravi Panjubar lying on his stomach, trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey with his feet and ankles bound behind him with a strip torn from a bed sheet. Bronson had also stuffed more of the bed sheet into the scientist's mouth. The scientist's eyes grew wide as he took in Metcalf. He tried to scream but the sound was muffled by his gag. Metcalf watched as the man's face turned purple, then moved to him before Panjubar could choke to death. He removed the strip of bed sheet from his mouth. Only a hoarse rasping noise was left of the man's voice, not enough to attract any attention from anyone passing by outside. Metcalf put a hand over Panjubar's mouth anyway.

"I was right," Bronson said. "He has two little girls. The oldest couldn't be more than ten. I tied both of them up before they knew what was happening. His wife also. None of them saw me."

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Metcalf ignored his rambling. What difference would it have made if they did see him? There was nobody who had a clue about the compound, let alone any knowledge of who resided there, and besides, with the physical changes Bronson had undergone, no one would be able to identify him from any mug shot books he might still be in. Bronson had been a petty thief when Metcalf infected him, and had proven useful over the years. He was good at stealing cars and breaking into buildings, but he had grown soft, and besides, penny-ante crooks like him were a dime a dozen. Some time soon Metcalf would trade him in for someone more of his own mindset. Bronson was as thin as a pole, and if you ignored his white hair and oddly shaped head, he could've been any other mall rat. With his arms and legs cut off, he wouldn't take up much space in Metcalf's private lab, and when the time was right, Metcalf would find a good use for him. He was sick of all the damn bleeding hearts he had surrounded himself with. Thank God for Vanessa. At times he even found himself missing Serena. At least she was one ruthless cold-hearted bitch.

Sighing, he located a good spot on Panjubar's neck and bit into it. Blood leaked out of the wound, and Metcalf sucked on the fluid and felt the warmth of it against his tongue. This was what was needed to secrete the virus. He bit down harder until the blood was gushing into his mouth.

A clattering of nails sounded on hardwood floors, then a German Shepherd raced into the room, its fangs bared, angry guttural noises coming from it. Almost as if it hit an invisible wall, the dog stopped, then tried to crawl towards Metcalf before turning and scampering away. From another room the dog whined in full agony, letting the world know that it would never forgive itself for its betrayal. Metcalf stopped his feeding. The blood had finished gushing, which meant the virus had spread.

Panjubar lay shivering below him, sweating profusely as if he had a bad case of the flu. Metcalf lifted the scientist onto his shoulder and carried him to the car, then lowered him into the trunk. Bronson had followed Metcalf outside and handed him manacles to secure the scientist's wrists and feet. After that, they drove to where they'd earlier left their van. After Panjubar was transported to the back of the van, Bronson drove the Chrysler LeBaron away to get rid of it. Metcalf sat in the back of the van with Panjubar. The man was already delirious with fever and it would be pointless for Metcalf to explain anything to him.
Metcalf sat for a moment, then took a pint bag of blood from a cooler and squeezed it into his mouth. That was the problem with infecting someone, the quick taste of blood left you wanting much more. Maybe it was an effect of the virus secretion. Whatever it was, Metcalf could’ve gone through a dozen pints without being satisfied. He fought back the urge and had just the one pint. He watched Panjubar squirm for a while, then took another pint bag from the cooler and forced the opening into the scientist’s mouth. Once Panjubar tasted the blood, he blindly sucked down the full pint, making Metcalf think of a newly-born piglet. The feeding eased Panjubar’s spasms. Metcalf left him to go up front.

Metcalf drove to a prearranged location. Bronson emerged from a thicket of shrubs where he’d been hiding, and jumped quickly into the passenger seat. They continued from there to a parking garage in downtown San Jose, then both vampires joined Dr. Ravi Panjubar in the back of the van. Another two hours and the sun would be coming up, and it would be brutal to try to head back towards Los Angeles then, even with dark shades and wide brimmed cowboy hats. Later, when it was dusk again, Metcalf would drive back to the compound.

The two vampires sat in silence, the only noise being the soft moaning from their newly infected brethren—or a newbie as Bronson liked to call them.

“It’s going to get hot back here,” Bronson said, breaking the silence. His face looked strained as he stared at Panjubar squirming on the floor. “Stuffy too. How about us cracking open a window?”

Metcalf didn’t bother answering him. If he opened a window someone passing by would be able to hear Panjubar’s moaning. Bad enough Bronson was as soft as a sponge, but he didn’t have the fucking brains to figure something like that out? He focused his stare on a spot across from him on the van’s wall and tried to remain perfectly still, trying hard not to think about how the other vampire’s voice was affecting him like nails on a chalkboard. Bronson must’ve given up waiting for an answer. Outside of the soft moaning coming from Panjubar, for the next ten minutes there was mostly silence. Bronson interrupted it by fidgeting. He took a pint of blood from the cooler and made a face to exaggerate his disgust.

“If you can believe it,” he said, “before you infected me I was a vegetarian. Big cosmic joke on me, huh?”

Metcalf didn’t say anything. If Bronson had looked carefully enough, he would’ve noticed a muscle twitching along Metcalf’s left eye. He would have also seen that Metcalf’s hands were clenched at his side. Bronson’s display of disgust grew more exaggerated as he emptied the pint bag into his mouth. Metcalf kept his stare frozen straight ahead. After some more minutes of blessed silence, Bronson had to comment about how watching what a newbie went through was the part he hated most about these trips.

“Damn, you can already see his head changing shape. That’s gotta hurt. It gives me the willies thinking about it. Kind of like I can feel it in my balls.”

Metcalf turned his dead eyes to Bronson. The other vampire wilted under his glare.

“Not another word,” Metcalf breathed softly, holding up a finger for emphasis.

Bronson nodded and looked away, his knees bouncing up and down nervously. Metcalf closed his eyes, waiting for dusk, but also half-hoping Bronson would say one more word.

Hayes rested his forehead against the tile wall in the shower and found himself grimacing every time the hot water hit his dick. Damn, it hurt. Either Chelsea bit him down there or she scratched him up something fierce with the silver stud that she had stuck through her tongue. Aside from his dick, he felt like shit. Every square inch of him. He wished he were still in bed, but he had too much he needed to do to allow himself to sleep late. After leaving Chelsea’s apartment, he went back to his motel room and set the alarm for eight in the morning, which gave him less than three hours of sleep. Groggy, his head throbbing and his throat feeling like he swallowed a mouthful of sawdust, all he wanted to do was crawl back under the covers, but such was the life of a dedicated PI. He was too close to Jim to let himself slack. And, as he always liked to tell himself, things could be worse. At least she didn’t give him crabs. There was no chance of that with her being as clean as a whistle down there. He had never been with a woman with a shaved pussy before, and he wasn’t sure he liked it. It seemed kind of creepy, almost like he was a pedophile, and would’ve much preferred if she had had a nice soft red bush, but fuck it, even though he had twenty years on her, she was still several years past legal—and kinkier than any woman he had ever hooked up with. She completely wore him out. Of course, all the rum and cokes and ecstasy they mixed probably contributed more to the way he was feeling than his lack of sleep and the marathon session she put him through. With the ecstasy still cruising through his system, he had a tough time focusing his thoughts, almost as if his brain was wrapped in a wool sock. At his age, what the fuck was he thinking?

He stepped out of the shower, moving slowly, gingerly, like an old man trying hard to keep his balance. He dried off quickly and wrapped a towel around his waist. The coffee had finished brewing. Complimentary coffee makers were a necessity these days for any motel he stayed at. He poured a cup and sipped it slowly. When he was done he refilled the mug and brought it over to a desk. He held his head in his hands for a minute until the room.
stopped swaying, then used his cell phone to call his office. Annie answered and asked him if he checked his email yet.

“Why, what did you send me?”

“Jesus, Don, you sound like shit. A late night?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled between sips of coffee. “I was staking out a location for witnesses. Come on, what is it?”

“Just check your email. I’ll wait.”

From the coyness in her voice, he knew she sent him something interesting. The motel offered high-speed Internet access. He plugged in his laptop and brought up his email. It took a minute or so before his eyes could focus and he could read the report Annie sent him about a guy found dead in a Cleveland alleyway, the corpse drained of most of its blood. Annie was able to talk to one of the detectives on the case, and he had leaked to her that it looked like a sledgehammer had been used to cave in the victim’s mouth and jaw. According to the cop there was nothing left of the lower part of the dead man’s face. Some more digging by Annie found that the victim, Duane Posey, was a known drug dealer and had been suspected of half a dozen sexual assaults, but never convicted. The fact that she got all this together before seven AM New York time impressed the hell out of Hayes.

“It looks like Jim is in Cleveland,” Annie said.

“Maybe. Maybe it’s just someone with a grudge. Could be a boyfriend of one of the women he assaulted. Taking a sledgehammer to someone’s face?”

“The blood, Don, the blood. And the body left in an alley. Remember, the throat was cut also.”

“Yeah I know, you’re right, it sounds like his signature.” Hayes stopped to try to get his brain working. Jesus, he was having trouble concentrating on the smallest things. “Here’s what I want you to do. Fax or overnight our drawing of Jim’s gal pal to every low-priced fleabag motel in Cleveland and the outlying areas. Offer a reward of ten grand to anyone who helps us find her.”

“Okay, but you realize you’re going to end up with dozens of false leads?”

“As long as it generates one good one. How about booking me the next flight you can to Cleveland, along with a rental car and motel room?”

“You got it, Chief. I’ll call you back.”

Annie hung up.

Whatever rum and ecstasy hangover Hayes had been suffering was gone. It happened so quickly, but all at once his mind felt cool, clear, the wool sock gone from his brain. He found himself tapping his foot anxiously while waiting for Annie’s return call. The more he thought about it the murder did sound like one of Jim’s, and it happened just last night. From the sound of it it was a fluke that the body was found so quickly—the cops were running a prostitution sweep and were checking out alleyways known for activity. More likely than not, Jim and that girl were still in Cleveland, and would be for the next few days. Fuck. This was the break he’d been waiting for. Annie called back with his flight and rental car information. The first flight she was able to book him on wasn’t leaving for several hours. She told him she’d have a hotel reservation for him later, and would get right on sending out the mystery girl’s drawing. After she hung up, Hayes debated whether to call Serena. He’d been hoping that he would have to rush to the airport and not have any time to make the call. He just did not want to talk to her. He thought of a dozen reasons why he shouldn’t call her, but it came down to she was the client. As much as he wanted to find Jim, he couldn’t make it a personal matter, it had to stay business. He had to do what was right. Reluctantly he dialed Serena’s number. His hearted was thumping when she picked up.

“I apologize for calling so early,” he told her, “but it seems likely that Jim is in Cleveland.”

“Donald, darling, that is wonderful news. I don’t understand, though. You sent out that girl’s drawing so quickly? And somebody has already recognized her?”

“No exactly.” Hayes wiped a hand across his forehead and realized once again Serena was making him sweat. He told Serena about the dead man found in a Cleveland back alley, his voice sounding distant in his head, almost as if it were coming from an echo chamber. There was a long silence from Serena, then she coolly asked him to email her the report on the dead man and that she would call him back after she had had a chance to read it. After she hung up, Hayes forwarded Annie’s email to her, then sat dreading Serena’s return call. When she called back, she told him in the same cool voice from earlier that he should go to Cleveland. There were no longer any mention about coincidences or misunderstanding on his part.

“I’ve already booked my flight,” he said. “I should be there in three hours.”

“Good… And how do you plan to find Jim?”

“Old fashioned shoe leather,” he said. “I’ll be checking out every fleabag motel and motor lodge in the city.”

Serena asked him to call her later with any news. She reminded him that she still hadn’t received a fax showing a drawing of Jim’s girlfriend, and hung up. Hayes sat frozen for a long moment, holding the cell phone, an uneasiness working its way into the pit of his stomach. He was overwhelmed with the impulse to just say the hell
with this. A little voice whispered in his brain that he should get as far away from Serena and Cleveland as he could, but fuck it, he was too damn close to Jim to give up. He convinced himself that his nerves being shot were just a side effect of the ecstasy. Yeah, Serena might not be happy that he confirmed his suspicions about the killings, or at least that he suspected Jim of being involved in them, but so what? As long as he did his job, and kept it confidential—which he would do with the absence of any solid evidence, what the fuck was she going to complain about? And even if she did, so what? He was only doing his job.

He got up, dressed and packed his suitcase. He planned to head straight to the airport and pick up some doughnuts and more coffee once he got there. His next stop, the ‘mistake on the lake’.

For some reason the word “mistake” stuck in his mind.

Serena was thoroughly annoyed. She had already called Metcalf back two other times.

“How come our connection is so shitty?” she asked.

“I already told you, dear, I’m in the back of a van parked in a San Jose garage.”

“Metcalf, darling, please watch this little snitty tone of yours. It doesn’t become you. If I heard you say that before do you think I’d be asking again? And why are you in San Jose?”

There was some soft static which Serena realized was Metcalf sighing, which exasperated the hell out of her. Condescending prick. He told her it didn’t matter.

“I think it does matter, darling, especially if you’re there to enlist a new recruit, which would be terribly sanctimonious of you given the way you make me grovel for your permission every time I’d like to add someone to my little family. Someone far less tolerant than me on hearing that would understandably do something justifiably spiteful, like cutting off all of your funding.”

“Look, Serena, what I do is for the common good. It’s not like I’m acting like you and infecting every hot looking girl because I like the way her pussy tastes.”

Serena’s face had colored to a pale pink. Her body shook slightly as she held the cell phone to her ear. Wilfred moved behind her to massage her shoulders, but she jerked herself free and elbowed him hard in the jaw. The blow would’ve been enough to knock a normal person’s head off. Wilfred backed away, massaging the area where he’d been hit. Gregory started to laugh, caught Wilfred’s angry glare, and zipped it. Zach mouthed to Serena that Metcalf was a dick and that she shouldn’t let him get to her. She was oblivious, a small inferno raging in her eyes.

“Explain to me how this is for the common good.”

Metcalf sighed again. “He’s a scientist. We need him to help us with the cure.”

“I’ve got news for you, Metcalf, darling, not everyone gives a shit about your cure. Some of us are quite happy with the way we are…Hello?…Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here. Serena, you’re right. I should’ve run it by you. I’m sorry. We’re getting off topic. Let’s get back to that dead guy in Cleveland. To me, it doesn’t sound like Jim’s work.”

“Oh, it’s Jim alright.”

“I don’t think so. He doesn’t smash in his victims’ faces like that. That’s an act of rage and hate. With Jim, it’s almost an act of sadness and melancholy. I bet the bleeding heart even sheds a few tears over each of his victims.”

“You think you fucking know everything? I’ve got news for you, darling, you’re not all-knowing and all-powerful. Jim’s in Cleveland right now, and we have a deal!”

“Calm down. I know we have a deal, but you don’t know Jim killed that guy.”

“Oh, I think I do.”

There was another long pause. Then, “This isn’t worth arguing over. Your PI is heading to Cleveland, right?”

“That’s what I told you.”

“Fine. Let’s wait and see if he finds him.”

“And when does he?”

“If he does then I’ll go to Cleveland as promised. In the meantime get yourself under control. The odds are that someone else did this killing. And for God’s sake, don’t do something stupid.”

“Like what, darling?”

Another soft, static-like sigh. “You know full well what I mean.”

“No, darling, I’m afraid I don’t. I’m too stupid to know what you mean. We’re not all as brilliant and razor-sharp as you.”

“Cut the shit, okay, Serena? You know exactly what I mean. Don’t go to Cleveland. We don’t need the attention. Just stay put until you hear from your PI. If Jim’s there, I’ll keep my word.”

“We don’t need the attention? But it’s okay for you to snatch famous scientists.”

“Jesus Christ. We’ve been over this…”

Serena swallowed back what she was going to say. Instead, her voice fell back to its normal sing-songish lilt,
the crackling glass quality from a few seconds earlier gone.

“Don’t worry, darling,” she said, laughing. “I won’t be doing anything to get us in trouble. I’ll stay put in
Manhattan. There’s a new club opening tonight that I desperately want to go to, so don’t worry.”

“Good. Have fun with your opening.”

“Oh, you know I always do.”

Serena made sure to hang up before him, not wanting to give Metcalf the opportunity to get the last word in.
She stood frozen, her eyes hard angry slits.

“Who the fuck does he think he is?” she said, her crackling glass voice back. “The bastard thinks his word is
God?”

Zach gave her a sympathetic smile. “Metcalf’s been on this God-complex bullshit for years, but the guy’s
nothing but an asshole. Let’s just be thankful he’s long gone from New York. So what’s next?”

Serena’s face scrunched up as she considered that. She caught Wilfred sullenly rubbing his jaw and her face
relaxed into an apologetic smile.

“Oh, darling, I did that, didn’t I? I wasn’t even aware.”

“That’s okay,” Wilfred mumbled, still pouting.

Serena moved over to him and touched his injured cheek, then her fingertips moved lightly down his chest
before sliding into his pants. While she was showing Wilfred how apologetic she was, she stopped for a moment to
tell Zach that they were going to Cleveland.

“Sure, I’ll book us a flight for tonight,” Zach said.

“No need to wait, darling. Arrange for a limo pickup. That way we can bring everything we need with us.”

“We could do the same with a private flight.”

“I know but there’s no reason to wait. Would you be a dear and arrange a pickup? Oh, and Gregory, I’m going
to need you to stay behind so our little inmates here don’t run wild.”

Gregory made a bitter face at that. “Why me?” he asked.

“I need someone I trust to watch over our little hive, but Gregory, darling, it wasn’t nice of you to take
pleasure out of poor Wilfred’s discomfort. Families don’t do that.”

Gregory nodded, his eyes lowered in shame. Serena turned back to Wilfred to finish making things up to him.

An hour later a Lincoln Continental limousine with darkened windows and shades drawn parked in front of
Serena’s converted hotel. Zach, decked out in the hot hazy August New York morning in a head to toe leather outfit,
dark wraparound shades, and a NY Mets baseball cap, loaded the limo with luggage, several coolers, and a duffel
bag packed with five antique Samurai swords that were bought through auction and made by the famous sword
maker, Hizen Tadahiro. Once the limo was loaded, Serena dashed from the hotel to the Lincoln, along with two
martial arts experts that Serena had infected two years earlier in preparation for Jim being found. Wilfred and Zach
joined them. Gregory stood in a darkened doorway brooding. The limo pulled away from the curb and Gregory
waved half-heartedly at it before heading back into the building.

Chapter 7

Duane Posey’s murder was a big story in Cleveland. Partly it was because of the grisly nature of it; his jaw
and mouth completely obliterated and most of his blood gone, but the interest was also because of his long history of
violence and suspected sexual assaults. When Carol was out getting breakfast, Jim turned on one of the local news
channels and caught the story. According to the reporter at the murder scene—an attractive twenty-something blond
whose wavy shoulder-length hair appeared shellacked, and who looked even downright diminutive compared to
Carol—made sure to keep a dour frown frozen on her face as she reported how Posey had been arrested for over a
half-dozen rapes during the past five years, but that the charges were dropped in each case. She didn’t spell it out,
but it was clear that the victims had been intimidated to where they were afraid to cooperate with the DA. A police
spokesman interviewed talked about how this was a bad guy and even though the streets might be safer without him,
no one had the right to take the law into their own hands and that the Cleveland police were going to aggressively
pursue his murderer. He hinted that given Posey’s violent past, this was more likely a revenge or drug killing than
something ghoulish, but he had no explanation about what had happened to the dead man’s blood. There was no
mention of the bar Carol had met Posey at, and thank God, nothing about Carol. But shit, what could they have,
anyway? Maybe Posey had accosted Carol in that bar, but he accosted another woman there also. Still, Jim couldn’t
help feeling like he had dodged a bullet. He and Carol had been getting careless. Most of the bodies he fed off of
were disposed of afterwards, the ones that were left behind he made sure wouldn’t be found for days, and that there
would be at least a plausible explanation for what had happened to the missing blood—such as it washing down a
sewer grate.

The story ended and the next story up was about the local baseball team’s recent six-game losing streak. Jim
turned off the set. He sure as fuck did dodge a bullet. The police found Posey’s body only an hour after the killing thanks to a prostitution sweep. Forget about how they could’ve been entering that alley while Jim was feeding; with them there so quickly after the killing all they would’ve had to find was one homeless person hidden in a doorway who had spotted Posey grabbing Carol and that could’ve led them to finding out about Carol and Posey meeting in that bar, and then a police drawing of Carol being splashed across the news. The thought of that made him wince. While there was never any risk of these predators hurting Carol—he was never more than a heartbeat away from her—he had been in denial over the police somehow tying her any of his killings. He made a decision then. He wasn’t going to use Carol as bait anymore.

He had quit smoking when he joined the Army, but right then he could’ve used a cigarette. Or more accurately, he could’ve chain smoked through a carton. The thought of how close he came to putting Carol in jeopardy left him jittery as hell. Over the last three years he had selfishly rationalized that she wanted to be part of what he did. It wasn’t anything they ever talked about, but he knew that this was tied to her being attacked in Newark; that being involved with killing these predators gave her a release from the anger that she carried. Because of that, he went along with it, but it still wasn’t right for him to include her. Fuck. A shiver went down his spine. Never again. Never fucking again. He knew she was going to fight him tooth and nail over it, but he was never going to subject her to that type of risk again. He would just have to suck it up and stop tormenting himself over what he needed to do. He knew what these people were, he could smell it off of them, fuck his conscience. He would just do what he had to, and be satisfied with knowing that in his own way he was making the world a better place. That police spokesman was full of shit.

Another shiver ran through him.

What the fuck did he almost do to Carol?

He shook his head as if by doing so he could shake those images of what could’ve happened out of his brain. Never again. Yeah, Carol was going to put up a stink about it, but never fucking again.

He breathed in deeply, held it, and tried to calm the noise buzzing through his mind. It was over. They dodged the bullet. Carol was safe. Time to move on.

He picked up the money roll from where he had tossed it the other night and peeled off several hundred dollars from it. The roll was still thick enough to choke a bull. He got off the bed, lifted it and stashed the roll underneath the wooden frame. Unless someone was going to drain the mattress, the bed weighed a good five hundred pounds, and no one was going to look under it for any money.

He couldn’t shake this his restlessness. He walked over to the window, pushed the curtains away so he could peek outside. The sky was gray, overcast, as if it were going to start raining later that afternoon. With the sun mostly hidden, he could probably go outside without getting sick, or at least not as sick as the sunlight usually made him. He didn’t feel like staying cooped up in this dingy motel room, but he also didn’t want to miss Carol when she got back. He closed his eyes and tried to decide what to do. Finally, he came to a decision and headed to the shower.

The water was lukewarm and came out in a drip, but he cleaned up as best he could, although he couldn’t help feeling that no amount of scrubbing would ever remove the smell of death from his skin; that even if the infection spread it would put all the laser hair removal outfits out of business.

“Never again,” she said. “You had my head pounding. I thought I was going to pass out.”

“Never again. Never fucking again.”

“Never again,” he said, a tentative smile moving across his face as he tried hard to keep his self-loathing hidden from her. “The waterbed helped a lot.”

“No, Hon, it wasn’t the waterbed.”

She moved her hands from behind his neck and rested them on his hairless chest. Before becoming infected, he had a small forest growing there. He smiled sickly to himself thinking how if the infection spread it would put all the laser hair removal outfits out of business.

“You feel good, Hon,” Carol breathed lightly. “So cool and so good. I’m burning up right now. Why don’t we go back to bed so you can cool me off.”

Jim gave her a quick kiss on her lips, his smile weakening as he slipped past her so he could get to his clothes. “We’ve got nine grand burning a hole in my pocket,” he said. “I was thinking you deserve a shopping spree. It’s been a while. We could save the other activity for later.”

Her eyes turned guarded. “I don’t feel like being away from you right now,” she said.

He slipped on a pair of jeans and a tee shirt, both of which he had washed in the sink the night before and left
hung up to dry. They were both damp, and with his body temperature at around seventy degrees, they were going to stay that way.

“I was thinking we’d make this a date. Do some shopping, catch a movie, you know, typical couple stuff.”

“I don’t want you to have to go outside. It was tough enough seeing you suffer yesterday.”

“It’s overcast. I’ll be fine. What do you say we go out and spend some money and have some fun?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Come on.”

She nodded without much enthusiasm. “Sure, okay.”

“Great, let’s go find us a mall.”

Jim squeezed her hand and felt a moist heat from her skin. He was always amazed at how much heat she produced. It was like a furnace working overtime inside her. They continued to hold hands as they left their motel room. Even with a gray and murky sky there was enough sunlight filtering through the clouds to make him nauseous. He pulled his baseball cap down further over his head and tried to keep his discomfort from Carol. It didn’t take long for them to find a mall, and once they were inside among the artificial fluorescent lighting he was fine. Carol quickly loosened up and got into her shopping. Most of her purchases were really for Jim; black stiletto pumps, sheer negligee, a perfume that she had him pick out, but he also convinced her to buy a few things for herself, CDs from bands he had never heard of, bath salts, lotions and a few other small luxury items. The mall had a California Pizza, and after they had gotten seated, Carol was absolutely buoyant, maybe happier than Jim had ever seen her. It was like all the hard years together had been stripped away from her, and it made him realize the type of life he was stealing from her when a day like this was an unusual extravagance for them.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

Jim shook his head, forcing a smile. “Nothing, it’s just nice to see you so happy.”

She grinned at that, her brown eyes gleaming. “It’s been a fun day. I’m glad you suggested it. And look at all my loot!”

She lifted her shopping bags in triumph. Jim nodded, still forcing the same rigid smile, all the while feeling sick to his stomach realizing this couldn’t go on much longer. She deserved a normal life, at least far more normal than what he was dragging her through. It was about time he quit being such a fucking selfish prick. Yeah, right, she wouldn’t be able to survive without him. Who the fuck was he kidding? Over time she’d get over him and move onto something closer to normalcy. He was the one who wouldn’t be able to survive a separation, but that was the way it was going to have to be. At least he’d be leaving her with close to nine thousand dollars. At least she’d have that to help her get started. He felt both relief and an unbelievable emptiness welling inside once he accepted that he would be leaving her. He would do it later that day. Make it like a Band-Aid that needed to be ripped off. Afterwards he would head to New York to finally finish old business. Finally do his last mission. Whatever heartache he was going to suffer wasn’t going to last long.

Carol’s pizza came. An olive and garlic combo. She wolfed down a slice and was making good progress on a second when she stopped to tilt her head and give him an odd look.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked.

Jim reached over to wipe a smudge of tomato sauce from her chin. “I’m doing good, babe, nothing to worry about.”

She smiled good-naturedly at the half-eaten slice she was holding. “It’s a good thing that stuff about garlic and vampires is only a myth,” she said. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be able to kiss me later.”

“That would never happen. Even if you were wearing a cross dipped in holy water I’d still be all over you.”

She laughed at that. “So what movie do you want to see?”

“What?”

“You mentioned a movie before. Any idea what you’d like to see?”

He’d forgotten about that, but that would be good. It would give them one day to live out as a real couple. At least it would be a pleasant memory for her. Later, after he took her back to their motel room, he’d get the money out from under the waterbed, then disappear after leaving her a long note. But that would be later. For now, he sat and drank her in, soaking in as much of her as he could, trying desperately to fill a suddenly vast cavernous hole within him.

“Whatever you want is good with me,” he said.

“I don’t even know what’s playing,” she said, a wistful smile showing. “It’s been so long since we’ve done something like see a movie. But I think I’d like to see something romantic. Maybe a tearjerker. I hope we can find something like that.”

After she finished her pizza, they got a newspaper and found what looked like a typical Hollywood tearjerker playing at a Cineplex a few miles away. The skies had cleared somewhat by the time they left the mall. Carol gave
Jim a worried look and suggested that they skip the movie. He shook his head, told her he’d be fine. “Once we get there we’ll be in a nice dark room. As good a place as any for me to hangout.”

As always when they went out during the day, Carol drove while Jim sat slumped in the passenger seat, trying hard to shrink his body and avoid as much sunlight as possible. He only half-heard the engines rumbling next to him as two bikers pulled up alongside their car. If he wasn’t so deep in his thoughts he probably would’ve noticed how familiar their tattoos looked and that one of them had a welt the size of a grapefruit bulging from his forehead. And he definitely would’ve noticed that the biker with the ugly welt was staring at him as if he knew him. But he was too wrapped up thinking about Carol to pay them any attention, and he didn’t notice them as they pulled back behind the car and kept their distance, following him and Carol into the Cineplex’s parking lot.

The movie theatre was nearly empty with only a few people scattered about. Jim and Carol sat in one of the back rows, with Carol’s head resting against his shoulder and both her hands lightly touching his arm. He sat trying to commit everything about her that he could to memory; her scent, the sound of her heart beating, her breathing, the feel of her fingers on his skin. He needed to absorb as much of her as possible. If he could get enough of her in his system, he’d be able to leave her to do what he needed to in New York.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“You realize this is the first movie we ever went to,” she said.

He felt a lump forming deep in his throat. Clearing it so he could get some words out, he said how it was about time they had a movie date. “The rate we’re going in another three years I’ll be taking you to the malt shop for an ice cream soda,” he said.

She nestled in closer to him. Her hair tickled his nose, but he wasn’t going to move. He breathed in as deeply as he could to fill his lungs up with her fragrance.

“Are you sure nothing’s wrong?” she asked.

“No, nothing. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered softly in his ear. “You’ve been acting more like a zombie today than a vampire.”

“Yeah, I guess I have. I’ve just got a lot on my mind.” Then very low so only she could hear, “The police already found that last guy’s body. It was a big story on the news this morning, I guess because of what I did to his face, also because they couldn’t figure out why he was missing so much blood.”

Her body stiffened. “It doesn’t matter,” she said, her whisper turning harsh. “No one saw anything. No one’s going to connect us to that piece of shit. But at least I know what you’ve been so preoccupied about.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s a stupid thing to worry about. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“You should be.”

She straightened up in her seat. Jim reached over to hold her hand, which she reluctantly let him do. He could feel the tenseness in her, and he wanted to kick himself for bringing up the subject. It was stupid and pointless. Even if someone in that bar spoke to the police and gave them Carol’s description, there would be no way for them to connect her to the murder. Worst case, they might want to question her, but they’d still end up hitting a dead end. From out of the corner of his eye, he could see her fidgeting in her seat, and he felt sick to his stomach over it.

“Let’s just get back to where we were, okay?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said in a voice that let him know that wasn’t going to happen, at least not anytime soon. After some more fidgeting she got up. “I’m going to get some Milk Duds and other junk,” she told him. She started to walk away, relented, and bent over him to kiss him on the mouth. “Don’t worry,” she said, “I’ll be back. All is forgiven.”

Jim watched her leave. He took a deep breath and tried to get his mind off of what was going to be happening later. He needed to relax so that the two of them could have one last good day together. He tried focusing on the movie screen. The commercials had ended and the coming attractions were starting up. When the fuck did they start running commercials in movie theatres? It didn’t seem right to him—to pay money to sit through commercials, especially given what the prices had become. Six bucks for an afternoon matinee. Christ, the world had changed on him. There would probably be a good ten minutes of previews, so Carol would have time to buy her candy and soft drinks before she’d miss any of the movie. From her tone he could tell that she had already put the subject behind her and wasn’t going to let it ruin her day. He was relieved about that. If he hadn’t mentioned it, later when she turned on the TV or radio, she’d have found out about that guy’s body being discovered, but that was still no reason for him to have brought it up now. Maybe it was his subconscious at work—maybe he was trying to sabotage their date so he’d have to spend the evening making it up to her, and by that time would’ve weakened enough so he wouldn’t be able to leave her. Yeah, it was probably something like that. A stony resolve hardened him. He wasn’t going to let that happen. No matter how much it was going to kill him to leave her, he was going to do right by Carol.
His thoughts were interrupted by someone taking the free seat next to him and jostling him. He glanced over. The guy was big with a thick body and a shaved head. He wore a familiar looking black leather jacket. Even in the darkness of the movie theatre Jim noticed that the tattoos on the man’s skull and neck also looked familiar. For a few seconds he sat confused, wondering first why the guy seemed familiar, then what the fuck the guy was doing taking a seat next to him in a nearly empty theatre. All of a sudden he realized the movie had already started minutes ago and Carol hadn’t come back yet. An icy panic hit him. He started to get up but another man took Carol’s seat and put out a thick arm to block him. Like the first guy, he was large, wore the same style leather jacket and had those same familiar tattoos. They were both bikers, both members of the same gang. The first guy who had sat down shoved a gun barrel into Jim’s side. He made a crack referring to the other biker as Pearce, and how Pearce must be going soft if he were going to let a skinny fuck like this knock him around. Jim looked harder at the second biker, Pearce, and saw that his forehead was badly bruised and swollen. Pearce didn’t say anything, but the hard lines that creased his face showed he didn’t appreciate the crack from his buddy. Jim recognized him from the night before as one of the bodyguards he knocked out while ripping off that drug dealer.

“Where’s Carol?” he asked.

The gun barrel was pushed harder into his ribs. “First off,” the biker said, “keep your voice low. We don’t want to disturb all these other nice moviegoers. They paid good money for their seats just like you, dipwad. They deserve to watch the movie in peace. And about that sweet piece of ass you were with, we’ve got her.”

“If you hurt her—”

“Oh, we’re going to hurt her plenty,” he said, grinning and showing off cracked and badly stained teeth that made Jim think of busted boards on a picket fence that had been splashed with mud. “We’re going to pass her around and have us a lot of fun. She’ll be taking it up the ass so much that cum will be dripping out of her ears by the time we’re done with her. That’s the price you pay for putting us through this hassle. But as long as you give us back our money, we’ll let her go when we’re done with her. It could take days, so a word of advice, don’t hold your breath.”

“If I were you I’d make a call right now and tell your friends they better not lay a hand on her.”

“What a fucking inconsiderate dipwad you are,” he said, his grin widening and showing off more of his badly formed and ruined teeth. “Didn’t you see the announcement they showed? You ain’t supposed to use cell phones in the theatre, dummy. It disturbs other people.”

A middle-aged man sitting half a dozen rows in front of them turned around to stare angrily at them.

“So,” the biker said.

“You better call your friends,” Jim said. “If any of them hurt her, you’re all dead.”

The biker got a chuckle out of that. “Big talk out of this one,” he said to Pearce. “I still don’t understand how a skinny little fuck like this got the better of you and Sid. I’m fucking embarrassed for you two just thinking about it.”

Jim moved quickly and ripped the biker’s gun arm out of its socket. Blood spurted from the opening and, from the reaction of the moviegoer half a dozen rows up who had stared at them seconds earlier, it must’ve sprayed him because he turned around to give them the evil eye again, probably thinking they had tossed some soda at him. Rubbing the back of his neck, he turned back to the movie. The biker was bleeding out fast, his lips moving as if he wanted to scream. Jim didn’t give him a chance to. He grabbed him by the throat and crushed his trachea. The hand attached to the torn-off arm was still gripping the handgun. Jim pried it loose, noted that it was a big piece of iron, probably a .45. He turned to Pearce, who had been watching it all in disbelief. The whole thing had taken less than a few seconds and the biker was having trouble fully processing it and making sense of what he witnessed. Once he did, he stumbled out of his seat. He tried to run but his legs had turned to rubber and he collapsed onto the floor. He moved awkwardly, his legs still rubbery as he pulled himself to his feet, and had gotten only a few feet away when Jim grabbed him by the scruff of his collar and half carried him as he hustled the biker out the side exit. The few people scattered about the theatre applauded them leaving.

“Here’s the deal,” Jim said once they were outside and alone. “You call your buddies now and warn them what happens if they hurt Carol. You don’t, I fucking tear you apart.”

“Let go of me! You fucking freak—”

Jim slapped him hard enough to rattle his teeth. Pearce looked stunned, his eyes dazed. Jim brought his hand back to slap him again, and some life flickered in the biker’s eyes. Pearce’s knees buckled and his hands moved up defensively to protect his face.

“I’ll call them, Jesus Fucking Christ, I’ll call them!”

Jim let go of his jacket collar, and the biker stumbled backwards before regaining his balance. His legs shaky, he took out a cell phone and made a call. All color had drained from his face and his hands shook.

“Come on, come on, answer,” he pleaded to no one in particular. Then, his voice frantic, “Raze, it’s me,
Pearce. Zeke’s dead. This guy’s a fucking freak. I swear to God he pulled Zeke’s arm right off….no, I’m not kidding….listen to me, don’t touch his girl. I’m dead if you do…what? No man, I’m serious, don’t fuck me like this.”

“Give me the phone,” Jim said.
“He wants to talk to you,” Pearce told Raze.
Pearce handed the phone to Jim.
“I want my girlfriend back safely. Now.”
There was no response, but Jim heard guys talking in the background.
“Hey, Raze, you hear what I said? I want her returned back to me.”

“Fuck you.”
The voice was soft and oily, like someone who thought he was dangerous and wanted to make sure everyone else knew that also.
“You bring her back now or I’m going to start hurting Pearce far worse than I hurt Zeke. He’ll tell me where you are.”
Some more silence, then, “You got fucking balls. You sucker punch me and my bros, rip me off, and then you think you got the right to call the shots?”
“I want her back.”
“Yeah, well, fuck you. I want my money back.”
“You can have it.”
There was another long stretch of silence. Then, “Yeah? Just like that, huh?”
“That’s right. As long as you bring her back to me safe. Otherwise it’s going to be a bloodbath.”
The guy on the other end started laughing in that same soft, threatening tone. “You really do got a set of fuckin’ watermelons hanging off you.”
“You think Pearce made that up about me ripping Zeke’s arm off?”
“Yeah, I do. You expect me to buy that bullshit?”
“Send one of your bros to the Cineplex on Orchard Drive. Theatre eight. He’ll find Zeke in the back row. His arm’s lying on the floor next to him.”
“You’re full of shit.”
Send someone.”
“If you really killed Zeke—”
“I did.”
“Fuck you.”
“Ask Pearce again.”
“I don’t care what the fuck he says. You got a piece on him, right? He’ll say whatever the fuck you want.”
“You want your money back. That’s what this is about. Let’s just do it.”
“I want more than just my money back. I want interest for what you’ve put me through.”
“That’s not going to happen. You can get your money back. Otherwise, you’ll lose Pearce, then you’ll lose a lot more after I find you.”
More silence, then, “Let me talk to Pearce.”
Jim handed the phone back to the biker who listened intently, his eyes large and scared.
“This is no shit…I know, I know, it sounds like bullshit but I saw it…on my mother’s grave, I swear to God…he ripped his arm right off like it was nothin’…this guy’s a fucking freak…yeah, okay.”
Pearce handed the phone back to Jim. Raze told him he still didn’t buy this bullshit about Zeke, but he was willing to let Jim give the money to Pearce and that the girl would be returned afterwards.
“That’s not going to happen. It needs to be an exchange.”
“What do you suggest, smart guy?”
“I’ll get the money. Carol doesn’t know where it is so it’s not worth hurting her to try and find out. It’s also hidden well enough that you’re not going to find it. Once I have the money, Pearce calls you back and we have an exchange somewhere public. Then we forget we ever ran into each other, and you can spend your energies arranging Zeke’s funeral.”
“You’re such a fucking smart guy. What if I tell you to fuck off and keep the money? From what I hear your girlfriend is a sweet-looking thing. I could put her to work and double my nine grand in a week.”
“You do that and more of your bros are going to die.”
“Fuck, you’re a cocky sonofabitch.”
“Just telling you what’s going to happen.”
Raze laughed a soft, rumbling laugh. “What the fuck, we’ll do it your way. Have Pearce call back within a
half hour or your girl’s being put to work.”
“Let me talk to her.”
“Can’t. She’s in transit. You got a half hour.”
Raze hung up. Jim steeled himself, handed the phone back to Pearce. The sun was hitting him hard and it hurt like hell, but he couldn’t afford to show Pearce any weakness. He told Pearce to leave his bike where it was, that he could pick it up later, then led him to his beat up Chevy Nova. Pearce made a face looking at it.
“This ain’t nothin’ but a tin can on wheels,” he complained.
“Shut up and get in.”
Pearce squeezed his way in and barely fit in the passenger seat, his knees pressed against the dashboard and his head cramped at an awkward angle. He watched with a smirk as Jim put on a pair of driving gloves.
“You take driving this tin can seriously?” Pearce asked.
Jim ignored him. He tried to sink low into his seat to avoid the sunlight, but it still found unprotected areas of his face and parts of his wrists where there was a gap between his jacket and gloves. Wherever the sunlight hit him it was like his flesh was boiling. Nausea welled up inside. He wanted to vomit, but the last thing he could afford to do was to start retching in front of Pearce. He fought back the urge. The biker seemed to sense his distress, his smirk hardening as he watched Jim.
“You don’t look too good,” Pearce said.
“Shut up.”
“This is inhumane making me ride in this tin can. Probably against the Geneva convention.”
“I said shut up.”
“And I heard you. How’d you do that to Zeke?”
“If you want I’ll give you a demonstration. What do you want pulled off, a finger or thumb? Or maybe your whole hand?”
“That’s okay. You don’t have to demonstrate nothin’. But how’d you learn to do that?”
Jim showed a grim smile. “Special forces training,” he said.
Pearce appeared to digest that. He chewed on his bottom lip for a minute, then asked if Jim was the guy who did the meth dealer that was all over the news. “The asshole with half his face gone and his blood missing. You’re the guy who did him, didn’t you?”
Jim didn’t answer him.
“What did you do with his blood?”
“Last time. Shut up.”
Jim pulled into the motor lodge’s parking lot. There were no bikes in sight. Of course if they had gotten Carol to tell them where she and Jim were staying, their bikes would be hidden, but he doubted there was anything they could’ve done to make Carol tell them that or anything else. He braced himself for the blast of sunlight that was coming, then left the car. The damn sun made it feel like his bones and joints were welded together and it made it hard for him to move normally. Using his thumb, he signaled for Pearce to get out of the car. The way the biker looked at him, it was clear that he knew something was wrong, but he left the car and followed Jim into his motel room without incident. Once inside the darkened room, Jim felt better, his nausea mostly gone and his strength back. The biker was still eyeing him, and Jim knew he was trying to decide whether to jump him, trying to decide how much of a weakened state Jim had fallen into. He didn’t give Pearce the chance to act. Instead he lifted the waterbed with one hand and took the money roll that was stashed underneath it. Pearce’s eyes dimmed watching that, realizing whatever chance he had was gone. Jim tossed him the money roll.
“Count the money and call Raze,” he said.
Pearce did exactly that.

* * * * *
Hayes had been in Cleveland for two hours and had already talked to the detectives investigating Duane Posey’s murder, and realized quickly they had nothing. They wanted to know why he was interested in the murder, and he fed them his standard bullshit story about researching it for a novelist. The lead investigator was a Detective Joe Colvin, and he appeared skeptical about that and wanted a name. That took Hayes aback. He knew he was sweating when he stumbled out with an excuse why he couldn’t give them that. He knew the guy thought he was full of shit, and all he could think was, fuck, if they arrest me and make me take a drug test I’m probably still loaded with ecstasy, fuck! His brain just wasn’t working right, still fuzzy from the three hours of sleep he had managed the night before, along with the booze and drugs. Colvin was a big bruising guy who from his scarred face and flattened off-centered nose must’ve been an amateur boxer when he was younger. He asked for Hayes’ PI license, then spent a good few minutes studying it. After that he wanted Hayes’ flight information and an alibi of where he was the night before. It occurred to Hayes that Colvin considered him a suspect for the murder—maybe thought he was
some psycho who got off on talking to the cops after a killing, and the thought of that made him start sweating more. He found himself holding his breath until Colvin dismissed him. That was a half hour ago, and the incident mostly sobered Hayes up. Since then he had been making his way to bars that were within walking distance of the murder site. He had hit three of them without any luck, and the one he had just entered was more divey than any of the others. The smell in the place was a mix of stale beer, urine and perspiration. The only customers were hardcore alkies, all staring bleary-eyed and seeing nothing as they nursed their drinks. Several of them with their stained pants were probably the source of the urine stench. Hayes approached the bartender and showed him a picture he had gotten from one of the newspapers of Duane Posey.

“You know him?” Hayes asked.
The bartender glanced at the picture, nodded. “Yeah, good old Duane,” he said.
“So you do know him?”
“Unfortunately.”
“You don’t like him much?”
“Nobody who knew Duane liked him much. The guy was an animal.”
“You know he was murdered last night.”
“Yeah, saw it on the news. Because of that I was able to come to work this morning with a smile on my face.”
The bartender scratched his jaw, his lips pulled back to show his teeth. “Someone out there deserves a medal. Or at least a lot of free drinks.”
“Was he here last night?”
The bartender’s eyes faded for a moment, then he shook his head. “He could’ve been. I can’t remember. Whenever Duane came here, I tried not to pay attention.”
“He had his share of enemies then?”
“Yeah, I’d say so. You could probably count anyone he ever met in that category.”
Hayes showed him a picture of Jim’s girlfriend.
“How about her? Ever see her?”
The bartender looked at the drawing and slowly shook his head. From his eyes and the way his mouth tightened, Hayes knew he had seen her recently.
“Nope,” the bartender said. “Sure would like to, though. That’s one beautiful girl. Not the type of customer I tend to get in here.”

Hayes collected the drawing and thanked the bartender for his time. “If she does come in here, call me on my cell.”
He handed the bartender a business card, who stood frowning severely as he stared at it.
“I don’t get it,” he said. “What’s the connection between this girl and a scumbag like Duane?”
Hayes smiled thinly. “None. The police told me he was seen hassling her. She’s the one I care about, I couldn’t care less about Duane. Her mom just died and her family hired me to find her so I could bring her back home for the funeral.”
The bartender almost bit. Almost. He started to open his mouth before closing it firmly, deciding that Hayes was bullshitting him. It didn’t matter. Hayes had what he needed, and when he left the bar an adrenaline rush was surging through him. He called Serena on her cell and told her that Jim’s in Cleveland. “Or at least he was last night,” he added.

“Donald, you never cease to amaze me. Have you found where he’s staying yet?”
“No yet. But I did find someone who saw Jim’s girlfriend. Can I talk frankly?”
“Of course,” she said, but with that crackling glass quality edging into her voice. The sound of it made Hayes’ heart beat just that much faster, and once again he found himself sweating. He knew he was making a mistake, but he told her his theory on how the girlfriend was used as bait to lure the victim into a dark alley. “I think he uses her with all these killings,” he said.
More glass crackling as she asked whether he had shared this speculation of his with anyone else.
“No, and I’m not going to.”
“Go on.”
Hayes wiped his brow, felt his heart skip in his chest. “I think Jim is killing people and drinking their blood.”
No response from Serena. Just dead silence. Hayes wiped a handkerchief along the back of his neck, continued, “These people being killed are all missing a lot of blood. Another thing they have in common is they’re all lowlifes, dregs of society. In Kansas City the word on the street was a vampire did the killing. Police are discounting that as nonsense, but I have a gut feeling someone saw the killing, and saw Jim drinking the victim’s blood.”

“Donald, my advice is spend your energies finding which motel Jim is staying at and to quit wasting them on
this kind of speculation. It is not anything you would ever be able to prove, and would not be beneficial for you if you could.”

Hayes’ heart was racing. Her tone had changed to something artificially friendly, but there was an underlying threat to it.

“Understood,” he said, his voice cracking.

“Good. And drink some water. Your voice sounds a bit froggy. Call me as soon as you find him.”

She hung up, and Hayes stood for a long moment feeling shaky inside, especially his heart which was fluttering like a butterfly. Why the fuck did he have to bring that up? What the fuck was the matter with him? He gritted his teeth as if he were in pain, then went back to his car where he cracked open a Cleveland yellow pages that he had picked up earlier and found its motel section. There were a lot of divey low-cost motels listed, especially around the airport. This was going to take a while. He called his office and spoke with Annie. She had faxed the drawing to all the motel’s that had fax machines and was overnighting copies to the rest. She had already called half of them and out of those fifteen of the desk clerks claimed the girl was staying with them. “That’s what a ten grand reward’s going to get you,” she added. “I was surprised I actually talked to people who were willing to admit they hadn’t seen her.”

“Restores your faith in humanity, don’t it?”

“You bet’cha.”

Annie gave him the list of leads, and told him she’d keep on it. Using a city map, Hayes located where the motels were and started with the ones closest to the airport. He had crossed six of the motels off his list when he heard the news report over the radio about a man found dead in a movie theatre, his body savagely mutilated. The newscaster didn’t specify how the body was mutilated, but did state that the police were considering it “one of the most vicious and depraved murders in recent Cleveland history”. As far as Hayes was concerned that said something.

One of the most vicious and depraved murders in recent Cleveland history.

All he could think of was Jim, and a vivid image of Jim’s drawing crystallized in his mind. A large part of the murder didn’t fit—the fact that it took place so soon after the other murder and that it happened in the middle of the day and in public. In the past the bodies would be left hidden so they wouldn’t be discovered for days, and Hayes was sure that there were plenty of corpses that still hadn’t been found. As much as this murder didn’t fit, he couldn’t shake the feeling that this was Jim’s work, and more than that, that something very wrong had happened to cause it and that more killings were on the way. He looked up the address for the Cineplex and put down his list of third-rate fleabag motels.

**Chapter 8**

Jim sat grimly waiting for Pearce’s phone to ring. Pearce had already called Raze to tell him most of the money was accounted for. Before Jim was willing to set up an exchange he wanted to talk with Carol to make sure she was okay. According to Raze she was still in transit, but he’d be calling back within the hour. That was forty minutes ago. Jim shifted his gaze to the biker, who appeared calm and unconcerned. Jim doubted he’d be so relaxed if he understood that if the call didn’t come in the next twenty minutes pieces of him were going to be ripped off until he told Jim where Raze and the rest of his biker gang could be found.

Pearce’s cell phone rang.

Jim nodded to him to answer it. Pearce flipped the phone open, listened intently and handed it to Jim.

“Zeke’s all over the news,” Raze said.

“At least you now know what you’re dealing with.”

“You fucking asshole.”

“Again, at least you know what you’re dealing with. Let me talk to Carol.”

Jim heard some talking in the background, then the sound of a woman gasping.

“Carol! Are you okay?” Jim yelled, his body tensing as he prepared to do worse to Pearce than they could possibly be doing to Carol.

There was some coughing, then Carol telling him she was okay. “They just took a rag out of my mouth,” she said.

“They haven’t hurt you?”

“Not too much.”

“What do you mean not too much?”

She was pulled away from the phone and Raze was back on.

“Quit your worrying,” Raze said. “We haven’t done nothin’ to her yet. Just a few bumps and bruises from her traveling. It’s not too comfortable riding in the trunk of a car. Where doin’ the exchange?”
“At the airport.”
“Uh uh,” Raze said. “As I told you, Zeke’s all over the news. The cops could have your description and there could be an all points out on you. It’s going to have to be someplace more private.”

“Bring her to my motel.”
“We can do that, Champ.”

Jim gave him the address of the motel and his room number.

“I want Carol here in fifteen minutes. Otherwise Pearce is dead and I start hunting for you,” Jim said. “When your guys get here, you let her go, and once she’s in the room safe with me, I let Pearce go with the money. There’s no other door to the room, so there’s no other place for me to sneak out to. You want to ask Pearce about that?”

“Don’t need to, Champ, your word’s good with me.”

“Anything other than that happens and it’s going to get ugly.”

“Don’t worry, Champ. Fifteen minutes. We’ll be there. Just don’t fuck things up on your end.”

Raze hung up. Jim handed the phone back to Pearce, then sat back and watched how relaxed Pearce appeared.

He knew what they were planning. Once Carol was in the room with him and they had their money they were going to storm the room and massacre the two of them—or maybe kill Jim and take Carol to sell into white slavery. It wouldn’t work out that way—if they tried something like that Jim would kill them, but they didn’t know what he was, so they thought it would be a cakewalk. He glanced again at Pearce and saw how the biker could barely contain his smirk. Jim had no doubt that was what was going to happen. Fine. It didn’t matter. As long as he had Carol back safely, it didn’t matter how many of these bikers he would have to kill.

He moved over to the window and pushed the curtains aside enough so he could look out.

“You don’t like sunlight much, do you?” Pearce asked.

Jim kept his stare out the window.

“Only thing you should be worrying about is whether your buddies try something stupid, because if they do you’re going to be wishing you were in Zeke’s place.”

“I’m not worried.”

Jim didn’t bother responding. Five minutes later he heard the roar of Harleys. Not too long after that he saw them. Two bikes pulled up, both riders were big guys, both showing the same tattoos that the other gang members had. Carol was not with them. From out of the corner of his eye Jim saw Pearce’s smirk widening. Jim broke a hole through the window with the butt end of the .45 he had taken off Zeke.

“Where’s Carol?” he yelled.

One of the bikers put a hand to his ear as if he couldn’t hear him. Both of them kept coming closer. The barrel of a sawed-off showed from under one of their leather jackets. They were moving faster now as they took their guns out. Jim raised his .45 to take out the closest of the two but Pearce rushed him, stabbing at him with a knife that he must’ve had hidden in one of his boots. The point of the blade hit him in the cheek, and if he were a normal human being it would’ve cut through to the bone. Instead it bounced off the same as if his skin were coated with metal. Pearce’s fist flew backwards, and he ended up hitting himself in the face. The biker fell to the floor as if he’d been sucker-punched by a heavyweight.

The door was kicked open. The biker with the sawed-off leveled the weapon at Jim’s chest and pulled the trigger. The other biker had pulled out a Glock and was firing at him. The force of the bullets knocked Jim against the wall. He hit it hard, then tumbled to the floor.

“Piece of shit asshole,” the biker with the Glock spat out. He fired a couple of more shots at Jim’s body. One of the bullets ricocheted and took off the tip of his pinky finger.

“What the fuck?” he started, but before he could say anything else, Jim had gotten to his knees. He dove forward and knocked the biker to the floor, then crawled on top of him. With a small twist of his shoulders he separated the biker’s head from his body. The other biker, the one with the sawed-off, was helping Pearce to his feet. When he saw what happened to his buddy, his jaw dropped open, his eyes quickly turning glassy. Pearce grabbed the shotgun from him and got off another round, again knocking Jim off his feet. Then Pearce slapped the other biker who he was calling Ash out of his stupor and the two of them ran from the room.

Jim pulled himself back to his feet and heard both of the Harley’s engines being gunned. He was still holding the dead biker’s head. In a heartbeat he was outside, throwing a fastball at Pearce. The biker ducked at the right moment and the bowling ball-sized head missed him by inches. Jim started running. It was almost five, and while the sun wasn’t as intense as earlier, it still hurt like hell, but he ignored it and kept running, moving a lot faster than either biker could’ve expected. A block later he had gained on them, and was now in stride with Ash. The biker pulled a 9 mm from his waistband, but before he could get a shot off Jim threw himself at him, hitting him with a solid tackle. They went down hard, the Harley skidding across the street and taking them with it. A Land Rover slammed on its brakes and tried swerving out of the way but still went over Ash’s skull, crushing it like a grape. Jim
rolled away. He collected himself, saw the biker was dead, and went through his pockets taking out a wallet and a cell phone. The driver of the Land Rover was a woman in her seventies with reddish-orange hair. She wore skintight black leotards and knee-high leather boots which made her look like an eggplant with long straws sticking out of it. Her cosmetically-caked face looked aghast as she explained how there was nothing she could do to avoid the man she ran over. Jim ignored her, pushed the Harley back up and went after Pearce.

Pearce had a block and a half lead on him. Jim gunned the Harley’s engine and squeezed in and out between cars, sometimes driving on the other side of the street, at other times pulling the bike onto the sidewalk and sending pedestrians scattering. Pearce tried to do the same, but he had lost his nerve and kept looking over his shoulder which slowed him down. His bike fishtailed taking a turn and by the time he righted himself Jim had made up the lost ground and was alongside him. He was about to launch himself at Pearce when the biker saved him the trouble by wiping out. Both Pearce and the Harley skidded along the road leaving a streak of rubber, blood and skin behind. After thirty yards, the bike hit a hydrant and knocked it over. Jim got off the Harley and checked on Pearce. Most of the skin from Pearce’s face had been torn off and there wasn’t much left to recognize him from. One eye was missing, the other was fluttering, and the little skin that was left was as white as milk. He was going fast. Water from the busted hydrant soaked Jim and washed away a thick stream of blood oozing from the biker.

“Where are they keeping her?”

Jim shook Pearce, but there was no recognition in the biker’s remaining eye. It was glazing over, becoming the eye of a corpse.

“Where the fuck is she?”

It was no use. Pearce was slipping away and death was already dropping over his face like a veil. Jim watched helplessly as his world seemed to be slipping away from him also. He needed the sonofabitch alive. He needed to know where Raze’s hideout was. Without any awareness of thought, he bent over the dying biker and sunk his teeth into Pearce’s already torn and bloody neck. A gush of blood poured down his throat. For a long moment the blood was all he was aware of, then he could feel the biker start to stir. He backed away, wiping the gore from his mouth. A blur of motion from out of the corner of his eye froze him. Then he was hit. Hard. Violently. The impact sent him flying.

For the few seconds that he was airborne the world slowed down on him. The sky floated above, the sun a reddish ball off in the horizon hung suspended as if by a string, a plane crawled overhead as if it were barely moving. Thoughts also slowed in his head. He found himself wondering what it was that hit him. It was only a few seconds but it seemed an eternity before he went crashing through a plate glass window, his shoulders first, then his head. If he were normal he would’ve been sliced to ribbons. As it was, he felt like he’d been worked over with a baseball bat. He picked himself up and crawled through the shattered window. He rubbed the dust and broken glass particles from his eyes, blinked a few times, and saw that a white Lincoln Continental limousine had hit him. From the driver’s side, a skinny dark haired woman with a cat-like face grinned ferociously at him, her hands clenching the steering wheel, her body stretched through a torn opening that separated the passenger area from the driver’s compartment. He blinked and rubbed his eyes again so he could focus better. Serena.

He took a couple of dazed steps towards the limo, still not believing what he saw. It didn’t make sense for her to be in Cleveland. Then he remembered the news story about Duane Posey. It must’ve been a national story. Somehow Serena made the connection.

Fuck.

He wanted to run, but the thought didn’t quite make it to his legs. He found himself still moving closer to the limo, still trying to convince himself that that wasn’t Serena. There was a body slumped over next to her wearing a chauffeur’s cap. She must’ve seen him feeding on Pearce, broke through the Plexiglas barrier, and either knocked out or killed the driver so she could take control of the wheel.

It was Serena alright.
Fuck.

The sidewalk had been empty but bystanders poured out of several of the shops lining the street, also some cars pulled over, and a small crowd gathered. The people kept their distance, a low murmur coming from them. Jim looked away from them and saw the back doors of the limo open. He recognized Zach and Wilfred as they left the car, both of whom looked amused. Two more men got out also. These two he didn’t recognize. One was about his size, the other maybe half a foot shorter, and both were carrying three and a half foot long swords, the blades polished to where they gleamed. The two men moved fluidly, and from the way they held their swords it was clear they knew how to use them.

More drivers were pulling over and the crowd was growing larger, maybe two dozen people. When they saw the two vampires moving on Jim with their swords, they started to back away. One of the bystanders took out a cell phone and pointed it at them. Again, Jim thought of running, but it wouldn’t do any good. He wouldn’t get far without one of the Harleys, and the limo and Serena’s gang stood between him and the bikes. He held his ground and waited for the two vampires brandishing swords to come closer. They were both grimacing, their movement becoming more sluggish with each step. Jim understood the reason for it. The sun was as poisonous to him as it was to them, but over the last three years he and Carol had moved around enough to where he had gotten used to it. He could deal with the pain. These two, along with the rest of Serena’s gang, had been living a sheltered life, probably going outside only after dark. The sun was now taking a toll on them.

Jim was still holding the .45 he had taken off Zeke. He waved it towards the crowd causing them to scatter. He then shot several rounds at the shorter of the two vampires, aiming at the fingers wrapped around the sword handle. A small piece of the vampire’s finger blew off, and he dropped the sword and grasped his damaged hand.

Jim leveled the gun at the vampire’s face and squeezed off three more rounds, hitting him squarely in the forehead and sending him flying backwards and bouncing off the Lincoln’s front grill. The other vampire attacked, aiming a blow towards Jim’s middle. He rolled under it and grabbed the sword the smaller vampire had dropped. A quick glance showed that Zach and Wilfred were no longer amused, their faces more pinched than anything else. They also looked green around the gills, not handling the fading sun well.

There was another attack where the larger vampire tried a flying drop kick while he swung a blow at Jim’s head. The vampire didn’t elevate as much as he expected to, not accounting for the effect the sun was having on his muscles. Coming in as low as he did, Jim was able to step aside and take a clean swing at him. He hit the blow solidly, the blade sinking several inches into the vampire’s neck. The vampire dropped his own sword as he frantically tried to grab at the blade digging into his neck, but Jim swept his feet out from under him and kicked down on the sword until the vampire’s head was cut off and rolling away from the body.

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Police sirens could be heard in the distance. Jim looked up. Zach and Wilfred were gone, both probably retreating into the safety of the limo and out of the late afternoon sun. The smaller vampire Jim had shot in the face looked unsteady as he struggled to get back to his feet. Jim couldn’t help showing a grim smile. Hopefully those three .45 slugs to the forehead scrambled the vampire’s brains a little, or at least gave him a wicked migraine. Jim thought about finishing the job with him, but the sirens were getting louder. He couldn’t afford anything sidetracking him from finding Carol. He needed to just grab Pearce and get out of there. He looked over to where he had left Pearce and saw that the biker was gone. He looked around to see where the biker might’ve crawled off to, but he was nowhere. It didn’t make any sense…

Oomph.

Someone had jumped on his back. Jim nearly fell to the pavement, but somehow kept his balance. Long thin legs wrapped around his waist, legs that he recognized. Sharp nails scraped his face and inched their way to his eyes. He was still holding the sword and used it to try to poke Serena off him, but she kept ducking.

“Surprised to see us, James?” Serena whispered in his ear, then bit down hard trying to tear off the fleshy lower part of his earlobe. Jim poked again with the sword and she let go of her grip on his ear. His ear stung, but it still felt intact.

“It’s been a long time,” she said, her breath frigid against his skin.

‘Not long enough,” he grunted.

Zach and Wilfred emerged from the back of the limo, both brandishing swords. The vampire who had taken the .45 slugs point blank in the face looked woozy but had recovered the sword that the dead vampire had dropped and was inching closer towards Jim. The police sirens were getting louder. The cell phone Jim had taken off Ash started ringing.

“Aren’t you going to answer that, James?” Serena asked, her claws again digging towards his eyes.

“The cops are going to be here in seconds,” Jim grunted as he tried to use the edge of the sword to move her away from his eyes.

She laughed, dodging his thrusts. “Let them,” she said. “Just means fresh blood for tonight.”
“Don’t you think Metcalf is going to be unhappy with you?”
“I couldn’t care less about Metcalf, Darling. You’re my only concern right now.”
“But I think you should care, Serena, Darling,” Jim said. “This spectacle you’ve created isn’t exactly the type of flying under the radar activity that Metcalf always used to demand. He’s going to be very unhappy with you.”
Her nails dug harder into his flesh.
“And what about you? Feeding out in the open where anyone could see you. Very careless of you, James.”
“But there’s a difference, Serena. Metcalf’s not my master.”
She let loose an angry string of profanities. The other three vampires had moved within striking distance, all with their swords raised. Serena bit hard against the side of Jim’s neck, trying to sever his jugular. Fuck, it hurt. He jumped forward, swinging out his blade in an arc hoping to catch one or more their legs. One of their blades went for his chest. He spun quickly and heard a sickening thud and then a high-pitched wail. In his mind’s eye he could see the blade sinking into Serena’s back. Her grip loosened and she fell away from him. He knew her injury wouldn’t be fatal—whatever internal organ had been damaged would regenerate, but he hoped it hurt like hell. He spun around again and caught Zach in the thigh, the blade sinking in halfway. The vampire howled like a wolf at the moon. Jim yanked the blade out and ran until he got to Ash’s bike. The vampire he had shot in the face was right behind him. Jim turned and raised Zeke’s .45. The vampire stopped in his tracks.
“Don’t,” he pleaded, his eyes looking sick.
“Sorry,” Jim said.
He squeezed off two more rounds hitting the vampire directly in the mouth. This time the vampire went down hard and stayed down. Jim thought about slicing off his head, but he could see police cruisers off in the distance and coming fast. He jumped on the Harley, gunned the engine and drove in the opposite direction going the wrong way down a one-way street. He turned down an alleyway that was too narrow for the limo, then down a staircase until he reached another alleyway. He pulled the Harley over so he could think. Off in the distance he could hear orders being shouted, followed by gunfire, and then awful blood-curdling screams—the kind that only truly frightened men could make. It became eerily quiet. He imagined what had happened—two or more police cruisers descending on Serena, the cops pulling out their guns and firing as Serena and her crew disregarded their orders and instead approached them. He pictured the massacre that followed, knowing that they would all want fresh blood after their exposure to the sun. He wondered how Serena planned to get rid of the limo and all those dead bodies, both human and otherwise…
Ash’s cell phone started ringing again.
Jim flipped the phone open.
“Ash, what the fuck is going on?” It was Raze’s voice. “How come you didn’t answer before? And why ain’t Pearce and Chuck answering their phones? What the fuck’s going on?”
“Ash is dead,” Jim said. “All of them are dead. That was a stupid stunt you tried pulling.”
“Is that so,” Raze said after a while.
“Yeah, that’s so. Four of your men are dead. For nine thousand dollars. You should be proud of yourself. All you had to do was give me Carol back and you would’ve had your money, and your men would still be alive.”
Another long pause, then, “You still have my money?”
Jim remembered that he had given the money to Pearce and hadn’t thought of taking it off the dying body. Wherever Pearce was that was where the money was.
“It’s gone,” he said.
“That’s too bad.”
“For you. Because you’re going to give me Carol back or I’m going to find you and make you suffer worse than you could ever imagine.”
“I don’t think so.”
“You don’t think I could find you?”
“Nah, I don’t think there’s much chance of that, at least not before your girl has hemorrhaged from taking a pool cue up the butthole. You want that to happen?”
Jim didn’t say anything. He stood trembling.
“If you weren’t such an asshole, you’d know I couldn’t make a deal with you.” Raze paused for a long moment before going on. “After you ripping me off? I’d be finished in my business if I did, especially after you killing one my men. You want your girl back in one piece you got to pay for her, and a hell of a lot more than what you took from me.”
“How much more?”
“You ain’t fucking with me about killing my other three men?”
“They’re all dead.”
Jim listened intently for a response, heard nothing, and after a while asked, “Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here. You killed four of my men. That’s going to cost you. Let’s say a million dollars.”

It got very quiet, so quiet that Jim could hear the blood pounding in his skull. “How am I supposed to get that kind of money?” he asked.

“If you’re resourceful enough to kill four of my men, then you’re resourceful enough to come up with that money. I’m giving you twenty-four hours. After that your girl’s gone, but only after we have our fun with her.”

“I could’ve killed you and your two bodyguards in that bathroom last night,” Jim said. “But I didn’t.”

“Your mistake, asshole.”

“You really don’t think I’ll be coming after you?”

“I’ll take my chances. And don’t bother calling me on this phone again. Think of it as already tossed away. I’ll be watching the news the next twenty-four hours. As long as I hear about an armored car heist or a bank job, I’ll be calling you back on Ash’s phone so we can work out a trade. If I don’t hear anything like that, we’re done. Wait a minute. For some extra incentive.”

Raze disappeared. Jim stood frozen, pressing the cell phone hard against his ear trying to hear anything that could give him a clue where Raze was. He heard some voices off in the distance, then the creaking of footsteps on a hardwood floor, a door being opened, and Raze’s voice telling someone that her boyfriend was on the phone.

“Hon?” It was Carol. Her voice was weak. Jim had the sense that she’d been crying, but was trying hard not to let him know that.

“I’m here,” Jim said. A freezing coldness slid over him, numbing him. “Are you okay? Have they hurt you?”

“I wouldn’t tell them anything,” she said, her voice breaking. He knew she was trying hard to keep from sobbing, and knowing that made the tears well up in his own eyes, made him swallow hard to keep from sobbing also.

“Have they hurt you?”

Very softly he heard her say yes. The connection was cut off. He stood frozen as he listened to the dead silence. After a minute or so he was able to move. He tried redialing Raze’s number that showed in the Caller Id, but no one answered. Again, he stood frozen, his muscles tensing. He tried to think of how he was going to get Carol back, but his mind just wouldn’t work. All he knew was he had to get moving. A homeless man wandered into the alleyway pushing a shopping cart. The man spotted Jim sitting on the Harley, still holding a samurai sword in one hand and a .45 in the other. The homeless man turned his shopping cart around. Jim’s mind started working. At least he had an idea of what he was going to do next. He gunned the Harley’s engine and drove away.

Chapter 9

Hayes sat in his rented Dodge Neon and tried to think things through. What he now had went past purely hypothetical and circumstantial. This was hard evidence for a murder investigation, or more accurately, a double-murder. He could no longer kid himself about Jim’s involvement.

He looked up and counted six police cars and two ambulances parked outside the Cineplex’s front entrance. Two older model sedans had also been left out front, and he guessed that those were being driven by the detectives on the case. A middle-aged man had been taken by stretcher onto one of the ambulances, and Hayes found out from talking to a nineteen year-old girl who worked selling tickets at the Cineplex that the man had passed out after seeing the dead body, at least that’s what she heard. The rumor going around the other Cineplex workers was that a man had been hacked to pieces and his body left in the back row, and that there was blood everywhere. Hayes showed her the drawing he had of Jim, but she popped her gum and stared blankly at it, saying she didn’t think she saw him. When he showed her the drawing of Jim’s girlfriend, she nodded.

“Yeah, she bought tickets from me. I think it was for The Notebook, Part 3. She wasn’t a blonde, though. She had dark brown hair.”

“How many tickets did you sell her?”

The girl thought about it, popped her gum some more. “I’m pretty sure she bought two tickets. Maybe the guy in that other drawing you showed me was with her, but I didn’t see him.”

That was twenty minutes ago. Since then a corpse had been removed from the Cineplex via a body bag. Hayes was still trying to decide what to do when a pair of hard knuckles rapped on the outside of his window. Detective Joe Colvin was leaning against the car peering in at him. Hayes had the engine running for the air conditioner. He turned it off and manually rolled down the window.

“What are you doing here?” Colvin asked. “And don’t tell me you’re researching a book for some asshole novelist. I know bullshit when I smell it and I sure as fuck know verbal diarrhea when I hear it.”

Hayes nodded. “Why don’t I get out of the car and we’ll talk.”

Colvin backed away so Hayes could join him. The homicide detective’s cheap suit that earlier had looked
wrinkled now gave the appearance of having been slept in. Colvin looked equally rumpled and worn out.

“What’s your interest in this?” Colvin said, his eyes hooded and tired as he stared at the PI. Hayes rubbed the back of neck. He opened his mouth to say something but closed it.

“I know you used to be a cop,” Colvin added. “New York’s PI licensing office put me in touch with your old precinct in Brooklyn. I talked to your old boss, Captain Hartlaub. He told me you used to be a damn good cop, and that you were a good guy and you’d do the right thing if asked. So I’m asking. Help me out if you know anything about these killings.”

Hayes nodded to himself as he came to a decision. His chest sunk a bit accepting what he was going to do. He knew Serena wasn’t going to be happy.

“I think these were done by the same guy,” he said. “The drug dealer killed in the alley last night and whoever it was in the movie theatre.”

“Yeah? What can you tell me I don’t know?”

“So you think so also?”

Colvin didn’t bother saying anything. His eyes held steady on Hayes. Hayes took out a handkerchief and wiped his neck. He could see the thought in Colvin’s eyes as the homicide detective suppressed a crack about how Hayes seemed to sweat a lot for a guy with a clear conscience.

“I’ve been trying to find this missing person for the past year,” Hayes said. “I don’t know anything about him other than a sketch my client gave me and that his first name is Jim, but I’ve been tracking him across the country. I have no real evidence, just a lot of bizarre circumstantial stuff, but I think he did both these killings, maybe some others.”

“Yeah? What do you have?”

Hayes made a pained face. “Jim’s girlfriend was at a bar near the murder scene last night. I think she was here also.”

Colvin looked more interested. “What bar?”

Hayes consulted a notepad and gave the detective the name and address. He told him how the bartender claimed he hadn’t seen her, but his reaction was a dead giveaway.

“Okay. Let’s say this mystery girlfriend was near the murder scene last night. How do you know she was here?”

“I talked with one of the cashiers working the tickets. She recognized a drawing I have of the girlfriend.”

“That’s funny,” Colvin muttered, rubbing his jaw. “Witnesses inside the movie theatre saw the victim with two other guys. No one said anything about seeing a girl with him.” His eyes shifted to meet Hayes’. “Why don’t you show me this drawing of yours.”

Hayes shook his head. “I have to talk to my client first.”

“Uh uh. Unless you want me to arrest you as a material witness, let’s see it.”

Hayes was still holding his handkerchief. It had gotten damp, but he wiped it again over his forehead and along his neck.

“It would help if I knew what happened in there,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

“It just would.” Hayes ran a hand through his hair, felt the dampness of it. “I heard the guy was hacked to death. And that it was bloody.”

Colvin looked around to see if anyone else was standing nearby, or at least close enough to hear them. No one was. He licked his lips.

“It was bloody, but the victim wasn’t hacked to death. According to the medical examiner his arm was ripped out of its socket, then while he was bleeding out, his throat was crushed.”

“What do you mean his arm was ripped out of the socket?”

“Just what I said.”

Hayes felt dizzy at the thought of that. He put a hand out on his rented Neon to steady himself.

“That mean something to you?” Colvin asked, an eyebrow arched.

“Nope, a big beefy guy. Bigger than me.”

“You know anything about him?”

“Yeah. We knew about him. He was a pretty bad character. Worked as an enforcer for a drug gang we have here in Cleveland called the Blood Dragons. Not a nice group.”

“His arm was pulled out of the socket…how would someone do something like that?”

“You tell me. About those drawings…?”
Hayes nodded. He went back into his car, got a folder and took two drawings out of it that he handed to Colvin.

“I’ve got other copies,” Hayes said. “You can keep those.”

“Thanks.”

While Colvin studied the drawings, he took out a half-smoked stogie from an inside suit jacket pocket, chomped down on it, then fished out an ancient-looking Zippo lighter from his pants pocket. He turned an eye suspiciously towards Hayes. “You’re not one of them smoking Nazis, are you?” he asked.

Hayes shook his head. “Feel free to light up.”

Colvin flicked the lighter, got a flame burning, then puffed on the cigar until he had the end glowing red. His large ruddy face relaxed as he breathed in a lungful of smoke. “You’d be surprised all the smoking Nazis out there who’d call my precinct to complain about my cigar smoke invading their personal space. Christ.” He held out the drawing of Jim’s girlfriend at arms length, studied it. “A good-looking girl,” he observed. “The guy looks like a freak, though. I need the name of your client.”

“I can’t give you that right now. I have to talk to her first.”

“Uh uh, you know better than that. I need her name.”

“I know, but I’m going to have to talk to her first. I’m sorry.”

Colvin looked like he was going to argue the point, but instead his face deflated as he exhaled out a small cloud of acrid smoke.

“Why’s she looking for this guy?”

“Beats me. She never told me.”

Colvin let out another small cloud of cigar smoke, nodded to himself. “You can talk to her first, but afterwards I’m going to need her name and phone number. Show me who recognized this mystery girlfriend.”

Hayes pointed out the cashier who was standing huddled with other Cineplex employees. Colvin took his cigar from his lips and gave it one last longing look before tapping out the lit end and placing it back in his inside jacket pocket. He had Hayes join him while he questioned the girl, then the other employees. When he was done, he told Hayes to stand off to the side while he showed Jim’s picture to the other witnesses. Afterwards he walked back to Hayes looking dejected.

“No one recognized your guy,” he said. “And none of them remembered seeing the girl.”

“It was probably too dark in there.”

Colvin nodded slowly, thinking about it. He told Hayes he wanted him to come with him to the bar where Jim’s girlfriend was seen the other night.

“Why’s she looking for this guy?”

“Beats me. She never told me.”

Colvin let out another small cloud of cigar smoke, nodded to himself. “You can talk to her first, but afterwards I’m going to need her name and phone number. Show me who recognized this mystery girlfriend.”

Hayes agreed and took several steps towards his car. He stopped when Colvin received a call on his cell. The homicide detective stood quietly listening. Hayes gave him a questioning look after Colvin put his cell phone away.

“We’ve got another one,” Colvin said incredulously, his large face falling slack. “Another dead Blood Dragon enforcer.” He closed his mouth as if he were trying to decide how much to trust this one-time cop and now private investigator. He made up his mind, and with his voice a low rumble, went on, “This one had his head torn off from his body. According to the medical examiner who’s with the body now, it was torn off, not cut off. The body was left inside a motel room near the Brook Park area. The head was found a couple of hundred feet outside the room. From the way it was scraped up and dented, the medical examiner thinks it was thrown.”

“You’re shittin’ me.”

Colvin shook his head. His face had paled, giving it a washed out look. He lowered his voice into a conspiratorial-type whisper, said, “A lot of bullets were fired inside the motel room, and while a lot of casings were found, not enough bullet holes were. I don’t know what the fuck is going on. I want you to follow me there. Maybe something will make sense to you. And when we get there you’re giving me the name of your client.”

Hayes agreed, and Colvin gave him the address. That same dizziness from before hit him as he walked back to his car. Somehow he stayed on his feet and the dizziness faded. Neither of these killings made any sense for Jim. They were too public and they offered to much risk for exposure. But as much as they didn’t make sense, Hayes knew it was Jim. He also knew something had gone seriously wrong, and a lot more of these killings were going to happen. There was something else about them, something buried deep in the recesses of his subconscious that tied it all together, and made sense of it. He just couldn’t pull out what it was.

When he returned back to his car he checked the name of the motel against the leads Annie had given him, and found that it was the next motel on his list. The one desk clerk Annie had spoken to who wasn’t full of shit. That had to be where Jim and his girlfriend were staying. If he hadn’t let himself get sidetracked by checking out this last murder, he would’ve been at the motel an hour ago, maybe even been there while Jim was ripping that gang
members head off. Fuck. What lousy timing turning on the radio and hearing about the ‘most vicious and depraved murders in recent Cleveland history’. He had a feeling the one at the motel might end up topping it—or if not that one, one of the others that were coming. He tried to piece together what he knew and come up with some idea of what had happened. The Cineplex murder was first. Jim and his girlfriend were out minding their own business and enjoying a movie when that gang member showed up. Later another gang member ended up in Jim’s motel room and was killed. Jim must’ve been one of the men that the witnesses saw with that dead gang member. Maybe they were confused and thought Jim’s girlfriend was also a guy. But how was that possible? From the drawing and every description he had of her, she was a tiny thing and as feminine looking as any woman has ever been. How could anyone confuse her as a guy? It just wasn’t possible. It must’ve been two guys inside that theatre with Jim, maybe the other gang member who was killed later in Jim’s motel room. So where was his girlfriend? Something had happened…fuck that, something was happening. He could almost see it, could almost put the jigsaw puzzle pieces together…

Hayes had been following a single car length behind Colvin’s older model Buick Regal, maintaining the same forty mile-per-hour clip the homicide detective was staying at. Things changed quickly. Colvin’s window was rolled down and a blue light placed on the roof, and then the car took a hard U-turn leaving Hayes stuck. He pulled over, thought about trying to follow Colvin. His cell phone rang. It was Serena. He considered letting it ring to his answering service, instead decided to just get it over with and rip that band aid off with one clean pull.

“Serena—”

“Donald,” she said, cutting him off, her voice harder and more shrill than he had heard from her before, “I’m in Cleveland right now. Please tell me that you’re still in Cleveland also?”

“Yeah, I am, but what are you doing here—”

“Seriously?” She laughed a glass-crackling type laugh. “Donald, you should know why I came here. To talk with you, of course. It is so very important. But right now we’re having engine trouble. I was so hoping you could help us out.”

His head was swimming as he tried to get a handle on her being in Cleveland at that moment.

“I don’t understand—”

“It’s very simple. Please drive by and pick up me and my companions. We so much need to talk.”

She gave him an intersection for him to go to and hung up. He cursed himself for answering the phone. It would’ve been hard enough telling her long distance how he had to go to the police with what he had, but with all the bizarre shit he was already stuck in the middle of the thought of having to tell Serena in person made him sick to his stomach. For a long moment he considered driving back to New York and saying the hell with it all, but instead let out a disgusted sigh and picked up his map of downtown Cleveland. He located the intersection Serena had given him. It was only five or six miles away and he memorized the turns he was going to have to make. For whatever reason he wanted to see this through, and more than that, find Jim and figure out what the fuck was going on with him. As he drove the streets became more desolate and more of the storefronts were boarded up, and then it was as if were entering a ghost town—what used to be an old warehouse district, but now looked deserted. It seemed like an odd place for Serena to end up at. He found the intersection. She stepped out of a doorway and waved to him. Her lips looked unnaturally large and red as if she had smeared too many layers of makeup over them. Something about the way they looked gave him the willies. He drove over to her, and tried not to look again at her lips.

“Donald, darling,” she said, “please open your trunk. But I’d rather that you not see what I need to put in it. It is private.”

He didn’t like what she was asking but he also didn’t want to argue with her. A voice whispered loudly in his skull that it would not be smart to argue. He unlocked the trunk and walked back to the front of his car. A police cruiser sat several blocks away. He squinted hard and saw that it was empty. It didn’t seem to make any sense for it to be there. He heard other voices talking with Serena, and remembered her mentioning having companions with her. When they were done putting whatever it was in the trunk, he turned and caught a quick glance of the three men with her. They were like shadows the way they moved, and he had this sense that he didn’t want to look at any of them too closely, but was left with the impression that they all had the same similar odd-shaped cat-like features as Serena and Jim. He figured that they were all related, maybe some inbreeding going on. He noted that one of them was limping.

“Donald, Darling, are you going to leave us standing here?” Serena asked, laughing.

He got in the driver’s seat. Serena took the seat next to him and her three companions piled into the back. Normally it would be tight fitting three adults back there, but like Serena, they all had slender body types, and they fit without any trouble. Outside of one quick glance in the rear view mirror, he kept his stare focused straight ahead. He didn’t want to look at any of them. At least not directly.

“There have been more killings, Serena. I think Jim is behind them.”
“That is interesting, Donald.” From her tone it was clear that she wasn’t at all interested. “May I suggest we go back to your hotel room so we can talk in a more comfortable setting?”

Hayes nodded. His instincts told him now was not a good time to fill her in on anything, especially along this isolated stretch of the city. As much as he wanted to peek over and see why her lips had looked so large and red before, he kept his stare frozen straight ahead. The silence inside the car unnerved him, but he knew it would be better to just keep his mouth shut for the time being. Now was especially not the time to tell her that he had talked with the police about Jim.

He drove further up the street so he could pull into a driveway and turn around more easily, and saw what looked like red smudges on the door of the abandoned police car. He almost kept driving straight ahead so he could see one way or the other what was smeared over that door, but again, his instincts told him now was not the time for that, and he turned the car around as planned. Nervously, he tried making small talk with Serena, asking how her trip was. She casually dismissed him by telling him that she’d rather not talk right now—she was tired and would like to rest until they got to his hotel room. That got a chuckle from one of her companions as they sat in the back seat whispering back and forth. Hayes strained to make out what they were saying but couldn’t quite get it. He realized his hands and wrists were aching, and noticed how tightly he was clenching the wheel and how the veins were bulging from his arms. He sensed that Serena was noticing those veins also, and that sent a chill up his spine.

“You’re sweating, Donald,” she said with a laugh.

“I’ve had a tough day so far,” he muttered, more than anything not wanting to look at her, especially not wanting to see why her lips were the way they were.

When he arrived at the hotel he started to pull into a parking space in front so they’d have to walk through the lobby, but Serena pointed out the hotel’s parking garage.

“Maybe it would be better if you parked in there,” she said.

Reluctantly, Hayes pulled away from the curb and drove into the attached garage. After parking, he got out of the car and heard Serena and her companions get out also. More than ever he didn’t want to look at them. Something told him not to. Even louder, the same gut instinct was screaming at him to run.

“Do you need to get your things out of the trunk?” he asked.

“They’ll be fine where they are,” Serena said.

Hayes led the way to the elevator, then stood staring at his hands folded in front of him. He could tell Serena and her companions found it amusing that he couldn’t get himself to look directly at any of them. He led them to his room, and once inside, went straight to the minibar and poured himself a scotch and water.

“Would any of you like one?” he offered the rest of them.

“No thank you,” Serena said, again laughing that shrill, glass-crackling laugh. “Your hand is shaking, Donald.”

“It’s been a tough day.”

“Yes, I’ve heard already. You’re repeating yourself.”

“Sorry.”

“No need to apologize for that—after all, you’ve had a tough day.” That brought sniggers from her companions. Serena continued, adding, “I certainly hope you haven’t been expensing those. Motel minibar drinks are ridiculously marked up.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t expense my food or drinks.”

“You’d be much better off buying a bottle at a liquor store.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

Hayes drained his drink and poured himself another one. He could sense that all of them had moved closer to him.

“You mentioned something about more killings earlier…” Serena started.

It all clicked in place then. With a clarity of thought, Hayes knew what had happened with Jim. He knew why those killings happened, why none of the witnesses remembered seeing Jim’s girlfriend in that theatre.

“Yeah, I did mention something like that,” he said.

“You think my Jim was involved?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Donald, I am paying you quite a lot of money for your services.”

He nodded. His throat had tightened, and he knew he’d have trouble talking. He tilted his glass and finished off what was left of his second scotch. It helped.

“It looks like he killed two more people today,” he said. “Both members of a local Cleveland drug gang. The Blood Dragons.”

“What an adorable name,” Serena said. “Yes, I do like that name. Any guess why my Jim would do something
like that."

“I have a guess. I think he got in some trouble with them. Maybe he took something of theirs, and maybe they
took something of his to get their stuff back.”
More curious than anything else, she asked, “What would they take of his?”
“His girlfriend.”
One of her companions snorted out a loud laugh.
“That reminds me, Donald, you never did fax me that girl’s drawing.”
Hayes nodded, fished a copy of the drawing out from a folder and handed it to Serena. It was purely reflex, he
couldn’t help it, but he turned to look at her and found himself staring at Serena’s mouth. He understood why it had
looked so big and red before. It had been smeared with blood, so much so that it looked caked on. He then looked
from her to the others. Their clothing was bullet-riddled, splotches of blood covered both it and their skin. One of
them had a four-leaf clover-like pattern of gunpowder burns in the middle of his forehead. Hayes thought he had
smelled gunpowder earlier when he was in the car with them.
“I think I could use another drink,” Hayes said.
“I think you’ve had enough, Donald. I’m afraid I might get a bit tipsy if I allow you to have another.”
All of it made sense then. Those bodies missing all that blood, Serena and her companions splattered with it.
Their freakish looks…being able to rip a man’s arm off…tearing another man’s head from its body…It was insane
but it all made sense.
Hayes made a move for the door. Serena showed an amazing quickness and stepped in front of him, grabbing
both his arms. It was like being held by steel bands. He couldn’t move.
“Donald, I have been very impressed with your work, otherwise I wouldn’t be having you join our little
family. I know you may not think so right now, but you should feel quite honored.”
“You must be satiated from before,” one of the others was telling her. “If you’d like I could take care of him.
That wouldn’t be too gay, would it?”
She laughed at that. “I don’t think so, but Donald and I have developed a very special bond. He’s been aching
for my touch for so long now that it would only be right if I did the honors.”
She looked hard into Hayes’ eye. All he could see were two empty dark holes.
“Please…” he said.
“You’re quite welcome,” she told him.
She picked him up and swung him to the floor, then bent over him. Her lips touched his throat. They were like
ice. With some shame he realized he was both terrified and excited. He was unable to move, unable to breath, his
heart pounding as he waited. It seemed a long time before she bit his throat, her teeth sinking deep into his flesh. He
knew she had severed his jugular. It hurt, but not as much as he would’ve thought. He closed his eyes and waited to
die. Death didn’t come, though. Instead it started hurting. Bad. And it only got worse. Like he was on fire. Like he
would go out of his mind. The world disappeared on him, leaving him nothing but pain. Before too long he wished
he were dead already.

* * * * *

Zach bound Hayes’s wrist and ankles using strips that he had ripped from a spare bed sheet taken from the
hotel room’s closet. The PI moaned softly, but mostly lay still on the floor. Zach pulled on the strips and tightened
his knot. He stood up, faced Serena and wrinkled his nose as if he smelled bad cheese.
“That sheet is some sort of polyester-cotton blend. We’d be lucky if it were even a hundred thread count.”
“I know, darling.”
Zach’s head pivoted slowly in a half circle as he took in the room, his disgust showing plainly on his face.
“Unbelievably tacky,” he said.
“Think of it as roughing it for a night, darling. Like we were camping.”
Zach nodded sullenly. Wilfred had joined him so he could prod Hayes in the back with the toe of his boot. The
PI stirred slightly, but not much more than that.
“Do you think that’s going to hold him?” Wilfred asked.
“For a few hours maybe,” Zach said. “But after that I don’t think so. We could use some chains.” He shifted
his gaze to Serena. “Is he worth this annoyance? If we got rid of him we could find someplace nice to spend the
night. Why stay cooped up in this dump?”
Serena used her index finger to wave Zach closer to her, then placed both hands on his chest. She leaned
forward and licked some of the dried blood off his face. The blood was from one of the cops they had massacred
earlier and not from any of them so she had no problem digesting it.
“Darling,” she whispered in his ear, “we’ll be fine for the night. And yes, he’s worth it. He is a very clever
snooper and could come in handy when we try to find Jim again.”
“We already found him once without his help.”
“I know. But that was luck. Jim knows we’re here now. It’s not going to be so easy the next time.”
“How do we know he hasn’t already taken off? That’s what I would do if I were him.”
“But you’re not him, Zach, darling. Jim wouldn’t do that, at least not without his precious girlfriend. As long as he doesn’t find her over the next twenty-four hours, Mr. Hayes could be very useful to us.” She leaned in closer to Zach and lowered her whisper so that only he could hear her. “And don’t be jealous, my sweetheart. No matter how many I add to our family, you’ll always be my favorite.”

He grunted, tried to maintain his sullen frown, but was obviously pleased with himself. The door to the room opened and the third surviving member of Serena’s group walked in, a duffel bag swung over his shoulder, and his arms loaded with luggage and a cooler. His forehead was still blackened with gunpowder from when Jim had shot him. He set everything down, found a corkscrew by the mini bar, then sat on the couch and tried to pry out a bullet that had lodged between his gum and tooth.

“I thought you were supposed to be some sort of hotshot martial arts sword guy,” Wilfred said to him. “Jim kicked the shit out of you.”

The vampire shrugged, removed the corkscrew from his mouth so he could talk.
“It wasn’t that asshole,” he said. “It was the sun. That’s what kicked the shit out of me. If I get another chance with him after the sun’s down, I’ll cut him to pieces.”
“I only want you cutting off his legs and arms,” Serena warned him. “Jim is not to be killed.”

The vampire nodded dully and went back to digging out the bullet. His body was swaying slightly from side to side—giving the impression that he was on a boat listing in a storm. He still looked woozy from the shots he took to the head.

“So that’s it,” Wilfred said, waving a hand casually at Hayes. “We’re just going to wait here until he wakes up?”

Serena shook her head.
“There’s no need for that,” she said. “The sun’s mostly down. Stefan here has no further excuses. I’d like you two to clean up and see what you can find out about this gang, the Blood Dragons. If we can find them, then we can find Jim’s precious girlfriend, and I would have to think things would get easy after that.”
“How about you and Zach?” Wilfred asked.
“Oh, don’t worry, we have other chores,” Serena said, smiling thinly. “I remember us passing a sex shop. They should have the chains we need for Mr. Hayes. After he’s been properly secured, Zach and I will do what we can to make this room tolerable since we could very well be spending from sunrise to sunset here tomorrow.” She turned her smile to Zach. “How about some satin sheets, goose down pillows, a comforter that hasn’t had hundreds of other people drooling and pissing and having sex on, among other niceties? We’ll see if we can make this sty a little bit more like home.”

Wilfred nodded, left to the bathroom to strip off his torn and blood-stained clothes and clean up. While Stefan waited, he opened the duffel bag and went over each sword with a damp cloth. Minutes later Hayes started to moan louder. Serena smiled at him the way a mother might a newborn child. She took a pint bag of blood from the cooler and kneeled by him so she could feed him. The PI suckled on it blindly.

“Metcalf is going to find out about what happened here,” Zach said. “I’m sure it’s already all over the news.”

Serena pretended not to hear him. After a while she asked him to be a dear and turn on CNN to see what they were reporting. Zach turned it on and it wasn’t just the top story—it was the only story. They were dubbing it the ‘Cleveland Massacre’, and whether they were showing a video recording that had been made by a bystander with a cell phone, interviewing witnesses, talking to a police spokesman, or showing the bloody aftermath, it was all Cleveland twenty-four by seven.

“At least we put this godforsaken city on the map,” Serena said.

* * * * *

Rolfe kept trying to get Noah off his Lazyboy recliner, but the man who would dwarf most NFL linemen was content in just taking long tokes from a joint the size of a Macanudo.

“Come on, man, this is big,” Rolfe implored.

Noah made a face as if Rolfe were full of shit. “Just chill, okay? I’m getting sick of hearing that. Whatever it is it can wait. Here, take a hit. This will calm you down, bro.”

Rolfe shook his head. “Fuck that, man, this is too important. I need your help now. Besides, you probably laced that sucker with crack.”

Noah smiled. “Guilty as charged.”

“Fuck, man, you need to let me show you this. It can’t wait, okay?”

Noah took a long drag on his cigar-sized joint and held the smoke in for a good twenty seconds before slowly
releasing it.

“If this is so important, just tell me what it is, okay, bro?”

“Can’t do that, man, you need to see this to believe it. So get your ass out of that seat ’cause we’re talking real cash here. Fucking thing just fell right out of the sky and into my lap. And it gives us a sweet way to screw those Dragon bitches.”

Noah gave him a hard eye as he struggled to get out of his chair. Puffing somewhat, he told Rolfe to show him what he had. “This better be good or I’m kicking your bony ass for messin’ with my evening,” he said.

“I’m not worried, man, my bony ass is safe. This is that good.”

Rolfe led Noah through the one-level ranch style house to an attached garage where his van was parked. He opened up the back of the van so Noah could get a good look at the man inside moaning and writhing on the floor. Even though the man’s tattoos were obscured with blood and dirt, enough of them were visible to show that he was a member of the Blood Dragons.

“Noah,” Noah said. He shifted his gaze to Rolfe. “You do this?”

“Not me. I’d like to take credit for it, but no, that boy was in some kind of accident, and some real freaky shit went down afterwards. Acid trippin’-type shit, shit you wouldn’t believe if you saw it.”

Noah squeezed the area around his mouth, his fingers working into his flesh as if they were kneading dough.

“What’s the point?” he said. “He’s not much more than road kill.”

“He’s still breathing.”

“Not for much longer.”

Rolfe scratched his head, then behind his ears. “I don’t know. If we can keep him alive, we can make him talk when he wakes up. Anyway, he keeps mumbling shit. Maybe he’ll spill something about where the rest of those Blood Dragon bitches keep their stash. Maybe with a little coaxing he’ll say something like that out loud. Even if he don’t, we could take some pictures of him and get us a ransom.”

Noah kneaded his fingers deeper into his flesh considering this. “It would really piss that asshole Raze off, wouldn’t it?” he said, chuckling lightly, his hard flesh shaking. “But fuck, if he dies on us…”

“No, if, when. And don’t worry, I’ll get rid of the body like I always do.”

Noah was nodding, a brightness cutting through his stoner’s eyes.

“You know who this asshole is?”

“Hard to tell with half his face gone.”

“That fucker Pearce.”

“No shit.”

“No shit. Get a sheet from the basement—I don’t want him bleeding on my carpeting. We’ll lay him down there. That Russian we used last time…”

“Yuri.”

“Whatever the fuck is name is. Get him over here. Let’s see if we can keep this asshole alive for a while.”

Rolfe went into the house. Noah climbed into the back of the van. The physical exertion left him out of breath, and he stood bent over with his hands on his knees. After his breathing had slowed he gave Pearce a hard look. The skin was gone from half the biker’s face, his clothes torn and what showed underneath looked like hamburger meat. Noah got a closer look. One of the eyes had been torn out and nothing but bone showed in the empty socket. He was amazed the guy was still alive and doubted whether they’d keep him breathing much longer, or for that matter, get anything useful out of him. But maybe with some photos, a finger cut off, and a few teeth pulled, they could squeeze a ransom payment out of Raze. It would be worth it to piss off that crazy bastard. And he knew Raze would pay what he had to to get Pearce back.

Rolfe came back carrying an old sheet bunched under an arm. They spread it out next to Pearce and rolled him onto it.

“Sonofabitch,” Noah yelped. He pulled back a hand and pressed it against his mouth.

“Are you okay?”

“Fuck, no, this asshole bit me.” Noah sucked on his hand for a long moment, then kicked Pearce hard enough in the side to crack ribs. The biker seemed oblivious to it. “This fucker doesn’t even know what’s up or down, and he still has to bite me. He better not have rabies or nothing. Fuck, I’m bleeding. Goddamn do I hate these fucking Blood Dragons.”

“We’ll get him conscious. You’ll get your chance with him.”

Noah shook his head angrily and gave Pearce another hard kick to the ribs. Together he and Rolfe lifted Pearce off the van and into the house. After they laid him out on a large piece of plastic, Noah went back to the garage to get a pair of pliers and a hatchet. In theory trying to get Pearce to reveal where the Blood Dragons kept their drugs stashed was a good idea, but he wasn’t going to wait for the biker to regain consciousness, not when
there were more satisfying ways to squeeze money from that gang.

Chapter 10

Metcalf had maintained his lotus position for hours, his back straight, his eyes closed and his finger tips touching lightly as his hands rested on his knees. He ignored the sounds of Dr. Ravi Panjubar moaning and rustling about on the floor—they couldn’t be helped, it was all part of the infection process. Bronson’s fidgeting and periodic heavy sighs and comments to himself made loudly enough for Metcalf to hear about how unbearably hot and stuffy it was in the van were a different matter. It grated on him, but he didn’t let it show. To any outside observer he would’ve been the picture of tranquility. Inside, though, he was fuming because of the other vampire’s restlessness and lack of discipline. But he knew if he let himself move he’d rip Bronson apart, and now was not a good time for that. Later, when they returned back to the compound, but not now.

Yeah, it was hot and stuffy back there, with the temperature reaching over ninety degrees, but it didn’t bother Metcalf. Instead, it brought back his pre-infection days when he was a field agent for the CIA. Back then he spent countless hours in the back of vans like this one in countries throughout Europe and the Middle East, at times the temperature baking the inside of his van to well over a hundred and twenty degrees. He’d sit quietly for hours to get the job done, sometimes eavesdropping, sometimes peering through the scope of a sniper rifle waiting for his target to show, but never letting the temperature or anything else affect him. Early on the CIA realized what they had—a pure sociopathic personality with a high intellect— and they put him on the dirtiest work they had. Metcalf flourished with it. What helped was he didn’t suffer from the other psychological defects that most other sociopaths tend to exhibit—he had no sexual deviancies, no sadistic tendencies, and took no pleasure from his killings. He didn’t enjoy it, but it didn’t bother him either. To him it was no different than flipping a light switch. He was good at what he did, one of the best the CIA had.

After ten years as a top assassin, he was unofficially brought back to New York and very quietly introduced to the wife of a dot-com billionaire. Her husband had supposedly fallen under the spell of some Eurotrash whore, and had transferred most of his wealth to this woman, leaving the wife only the fifty million she was allowed under the prenup she signed. The husband had since dropped out of the real world to live in this whore’s converted hotel that was located in the Union Square area of downtown Manhattan. The wife met alone with Metcalf, telling him how she wanted this bitch killed, figuring that that would break the spell and send her husband back to her, and she was prepared to transfer two million dollars to an offshore account for Metcalf to get the job done. He agreed to do it. Two million dollars would more than adequately pay for his retirement, and the job had a wink-nod sanction from his boss who was an acquaintance of the wife’s family. Anyway, it didn’t matter to him what light switches he flipped as long as he was compensated properly for it.

He spent a week in an untraceable van parked outside of the once-upon-a-time hotel that his target now owned and operated as a private residence, all the while peering out a rifle scope that was trained on the building’s front door. This was during a brutally hot and muggy period in August, but Metcalf sat motionless as he waited for his target to show. Anyone looking at him would’ve thought he was a marble sculpture, not even a drop of perspiration showing. If he got his chance to take his target out, the van would disappear from the face of the planet, and nothing would ever be able to connect him with the hit. After a week without seeing anyone enter or leave the building he was beginning to have his doubts whether anyone was actually inside. The windows had all been painted black so he couldn’t look through them, and if people were leaving and getting back into the hotel he had no idea how they were doing it. For all he knew they had all packed up weeks ago to go to the Hamptons for the season. He decided to break in, do some recon, and take her out if she was actually holed up there. Breaking in was easy, he used a grappling hook to scale up to a fourth floor landing, then broke in through a window. He had a .45 with an attached silencer and enough extra magazines to take out a small village. His plan was to move from room to room until he either found his target or uncovered information as to where she was. Anyone else he came across would be knocked unconscious if he could do it quietly, if not, he’d take them out also.

The first room he entered he was quiet enough that no one should’ve been able to hear him, and was surprised when a scrappy-looking man turned to face him. What seemed odd to him was the way the man’s nose wrinkled, almost as if he had smelled Metcalf. The man was a skinny runt who couldn’t have been more than half of Metcalf’s weight. Metcalf put a finger to his lips to warn him to be quiet. Instead the man came after him, moving faster than anyone should’ve been able to. Metcalf still got off two kill shots that hit the man squarely in the heart, but other than knocking him back a foot, didn’t stop him. He just kept coming. Metcalf couldn’t believe the strength or the quickness of this man as he grabbed Metcalf’s wrist and snapped it, then picked Metcalf up and slammed him to the floor. It didn’t make any sense. The man couldn’t be more than a buck thirty, and Metcalf should’ve been able to handle him easily, instead he was held immobile on the floor until his target was called into the room.

She took his .45 off him, then pulled his black knit mask off his face and stared at him with both curiosity and
amusement mixing in her eyes. With a short nod she had the other man get off him while she took his place. She was
tall but as skinny as a rail, and couldn’t have weighed more than ninety pounds, and he couldn’t budge under her
rank. It made no logical sense. He accepted the fact that he was in over his head, that this was something far outside
the norm, and that he was a dead man. It didn’t much matter to him. He was one of those rare sociopaths who valued
his own life as little as he did others.

“You came here to kill me,” she said softly, more as a statement than a question, her voice hypnotic, almost
trace-like. He found himself strongly attracted to her. It was partly her looks and partly this dense odor of sexuality
that came off her like musk, but it was more than that. He could see in her eyes the same cold ruthlessness that he
saw every day when he looked in a mirror. They were kindred spirits, and he had met so few in his lifetime.

It didn’t matter anymore. It was over. He nodded. At that moment he felt no allegiance to the woman who had
hired him, nor to The Company.

“You’re a hit man, aren’t you?”
He didn’t bother answering her since it was obvious.
She spoke with the man who had disabled him, asking whether Metcalf had made any noise when he broke
into the room. The man shook his head and said the only noise was his heart beating. “And it was a slow, calm
beat,” he added.

“You must be well-trained,” she said to Metcalf. “You’re not even showing any pain over your broken wrist.”
“What would be the point?” he said.
She nodded at that and asked him who he worked for. He told her. She seemed surprised about that. “Why
would the CIA even know about me?” she asked.

“They’re don’t. This is an outside job.”
He explained to her then who he had been hired by and why. “I’d like to ask a favor,” he said. “Could you get
this over with quickly?”
She showed a thin impish smile.
“Get what over with, darling?”
“Whatever you’re going to do to me. Kill me, I suppose.”
Seconds before he had seen his death in her eyes, but that changed. Her eyes softened subtly, and he guessed
that she must’ve also recognized him as a kindred spirit.

“But darling,” she said, laughing lightly. “If I were to do that I’d have to offer you a last meal first, and I’m
afraid what we have here isn’t anything you’d care to imbibe in, at least not at this time. Later, perhaps.”

A small crowd that had gathered behind her, and they started to complain once they realized she’d had a
change of heart. She quieted them, then moved in close to Metcalf, her teeth caressing his throat for several seconds
before biting in. Somehow he knew she was going to do that. He also knew what was going to happen. None of it
came as a surprise, and he quietly made his transition from spook to vampire. Later, after his fever had broken and
he had gone through the changes, he cleaned up whatever loose ends had been left. He took care of the dot-com
billionaire’s wife, his ex-boss and anyone else who might’ve been able to connect him to Serena. As far as the CIA
was concerned he had dropped off the face of the planet.

Metcalf’s cell phone rang and it brought him out of his nostalgic reminiscing of the old days. According to the
Caller ID it was Walter Smith, one of the residents of Serena’s hotel. Smith was in his late fifties and was a small
bald man who since his infection resembled a lizard more than anything human. Serena had chosen Smith early on
for his money, which she later used to buy the hotel, and Smith held a quiet grudge against her. He frequently filled
Metcalf in on her activities. Metcalf answered the phone and asked what Smith wanted. Smith tittered on his end.

“Oh.” Smith’s voice lowered. “You must know that Serena and her posse left this morning to
Cleveland?...Hello, Metcalf, are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here. No, I didn’t know that. She promised me she was going to stay in New York.”
There was some more nervous laughter on Walter’s end. “She did, did she? That’s not even the half of it. If
you were near a TV you would see what I’m talking about.” He paused for a moment, then went on, his voice more
guarded. “There was an incident in Cleveland. Eight police officers slaughtered. According to witnesses, the killers
drank their blood and took off in one of the police cars. One of the witnesses made a video recording. It’s not the
best picture quality, but you can make out Serena in it.”

Metcalf sat quietly for a moment processing what Smith told him, then asked if there was anything else. Smith
seemed surprised by Metcalf’s reaction.

“I thought you’d be spitting nails,” he said.
“It wouldn’t do any good. Again, was there anything else?”
“Nope, but I’d have to think that would be quite enough.”

Metcalf told him it was and disconnected the call. He tried calling Serena, but as he expected she didn’t pick up. Bronson was watching him, his lips pursed as he tried to figure out what had happened from Metcalf’s end of the conversation. The other vampire knew better than to ask Metcalf. One look at the darkness clouding Metcalf’s face told the other vampire that much. Metcalf shifted his gaze to meet Bronson’s eyes, and the other vampire looked away.

“I want you to take me to San Jose International Airport,” Metcalf said. “After that you’re going to drive back to the compound. You’re not going to be able to get into the lower level by yourself, so you and the Doctor here will stay in the house. It might take me a day or longer to get back, but if you do anything other than that I will hunt you down wherever you end up, and I’ll make you suffer worse than you could ever imagine. Do you understand that?”

Bronson forced a crooked smile. “Yeah, fuck, don’t worry. You should know me better than that. I’m going to do as I’m told, okay?”

“You know that I’ve had tracking chips implanted in all of your skulls. The same that’s done with show dogs.”

Bronson’s smile dimmed a bit. “Yeah, I know that.”

“Well?”

Bronson looked confused. “I’m going to drive you to the airport, then back to the compound. What else are you asking?”

“What the fuck do you think? Get your ass up there in the driver’s seat.”

“What? But it’s still a couple of hours before sunset.”

“Yeah?”

“What do you mean? I don’t have any protection against the sunlight. I’ll get sick as a dog doing that.”

“That’s probably true. The sun’s going to make you feel like your flesh is burning off your body. But you know what? You’ll get over it. If you stay back here any longer with me, the pain’s going to be a lot worse, and it will be forever.”

A shadow fell over Bronson’s eyes. He looked away from Metcalf, a sourness shrinking his mouth. “Chrissakes, Metcalf, there’s no need for that. Not after everything we’ve been through together. When you said you wanted to go to the airport, I thought you meant after it got dark out. I didn’t know you meant now. If I did, I’d just take you.”

Bronson continued to sulk as he left the back of the van and went up front. Metcalf stayed where he was. While Bronson drove, Metcalf called the airlines and arranged the first flight he could to Cleveland. After that he got Vanessa on the phone and told her what he needed her to do.

* * * * *

Jim had stashed the sword behind a dumpster and now stood across the street from the bar that he had robbed Raze at the night before. Mostly hidden in shadows, he watched for Raze or any of his gang members to show up but so far hadn’t seen anyone with skull tattoos displaying winged dragons and Chinese letters. It was hard for him to just stand still and wait like he was doing—his insides were knotted up to where it was like a fist squeezing his heart. He needed to do something, anything, to look for Carol. On the way to the bar he had picked up a carton of smokes and was sucking down one cig after the next, but they weren’t helping much with his nerves. He tossed a half-smoked cig to the ground and crushed it out with his heel. Maybe it was a mistake, maybe it wasn’t, but he couldn’t stand there any longer. He walked across the street and entered the bar.

The place was a lot quieter than the night before and a lot emptier. It was several hours before a live band was scheduled, and maybe twenty people sat around the bar and at tables drinking while a sound system cranked out Mellencamp tracks that were older than most of the people there. A lone bartender was on the job. He was in his thirties, a big man with a pink face the color of bologna and a shaved scalp that would’ve been mostly bald if he’d allow his hair to grow out. He watched Jim approach, his stare disinterested. He crossed his arms along his chest to show off thick forearms and large fleshy hands. He looked like someone who’d have no problem busting skulls and tossing drunkards head first out into the gutter if given the opportunity. Jim took a seat at the bar across from him. He leaned forward so he could talk without anyone else other than the bartender hearing him. The bartender stood impassively and flexed his large forearms.

“What’s your name?” Jim asked.

The bartender scratched his jaw, yawned. “What difference does it make?”

“Come one, I’m just trying to be friendly. I like to know who’s pouring me drinks. Nothing more than that, and if it helps any my name’s Jim.”

“Pete.”

Jim put a twenty dollar bill on the bar. “Okay, Pete, a Bud.”
The bartender started to pull a draft. Jim leaned closer to him.
“I’m looking for Raze,” he said.
“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Pete said, his stare focused on the draft beer he was pouring.
“Sure you do. Raze was here last night dealing like he always does. The two of us ended up doing some business and we need to do some more, so I’m looking for him.”
Pete gave Jim a quick look, then moved his stare back to the draft. He finished pouring the beer and placed the glass in front of Jim.
“That’s three dollars,” he said. “Drink it and get out of here, ’cause I don’t know anyone named Raze and I don’t appreciate the insinuation.”
He reached for the twenty on the bar. Jim covered Pete’s hand with his own. A bare trace of a smile showed on the bartender’s lips as he looked up.
“That was a mistake,” he said.
He reached for something under the bar—an axe handle, a lead pipe, maybe a baseball bat, but before he could do much with it, Jim squeezed his hand to the point where bones started to break. Tears flooded Pete’s eyes and his knees buckled enough to drop him several inches.
“Ow ow ow,” he cried. “For Chrissakes, let go!”
Jim could sense other faces turning toward him.
“Quiet down,” he ordered softly. “You’re making a spectacle of yourself. Anyplace we can talk privately?”
Pete nodded fervently as if his life depended on it, which in a way it did.
“Okay. Drop whatever it is you’re holding under the bar, then lead the way. And don’t fucking test me.”
Pete again nodded. Jim heard something drop, and out of curiosity looked down to see an axe handle rolling on the floor by the bartender’s feet. He let Pete go, and the bartender pulled back his damaged hand and held it at an awkward angle while he massaged it.
“This really hurts,” he said. “I think you broke some bones.” He squeezed his eyes shut, then stumbled for a second before regaining his balance. “I don’t feel so good,” he said. He didn’t look too good either, like he might pass out.
“You have any aspirin?” Jim said.
Pete nodded glumly.
“Take some.”
Pete fished out a bottle of aspirin from a drawer, but struggled with the child proof cap.
“Why do they have to do this?” he muttered, frustrated. “How’s someone with a broken hand supposed to open one of these things?”
Jim took the bottle from him and opened it. Pete tossed a handful of tablets into his mouth, chewed them as if they were mints, then stumbled out from behind the bar and led the way to a room in back. People in the bar were still watching them, but no one seemed overly interested, and no one bothered to say anything.
“I really think you broke some bones,” Pete complained once they were alone. They were standing only a foot or so away from each other in a cluttered stockroom no bigger than a coat closet. Beer kegs and cases of vodka, whiskey and gin were stacked along the walls. The bartender’s face had become wet with tears. “It really hurts.”
“Where’s Raze?”
“I don’t know any Raze.”
Jim edged closer to him. Pete started to raise both hands in a defensive gesture, winced and grabbed at his damaged hand again.
“Goddamn, I really think you broke up my hand. And I don’t know who you’re asking about. I’m just a bartender here. I serve drinks, I clean up the bar, I restock the beer kegs, and I bounce when there’s trouble. That’s all I do here. I don’t know anyone named Raze.”
Jim stopped, gave the bartender a skeptical look. “Why the attitude with me earlier?”
Pete met his eyes. “Because part of my job is to smell trouble, and I could smell it on you the second you walked into the bar. I could also see you’re packing. You don’t really have the body type to hide a big piece of iron on you.”
Jim opened his jacket and pulled out the .45 that he had shoved in his waistband. He held the gun loosely by his side. The bartender tried hard not to look at it.
“You’re not being honest with me, Pete. If you’re tending bar here, you have to know who I’m talking about. He was here last night with two of his boys dealing product out of your men’s room.”
Pete nodded. “The bikers with the skull tattoos. Yeah, I see them here, but I keep out of their business. Other than taking drink orders, I’ve never said word one to any of them. I swear.”
“That sounds like bullshit.”
“It’s not.”
“Someone here has to know them.”
Pete lowered his eyes enough to answer that. He tried to meet Jim’s eyes again, but it was too late.
“Okay, so who is it?”
The bartender looked away and shook his head, his lips making a red gash across his face as they pressed tight together.
“I really don’t want to hurt you if you’re not involved,” Jim said. He pointed the .45 at one of the kegs stacked on the floor and blew a hole through it. Pete nearly jumped out of his shoes at the sound of the gunshot. Beer poured out of the keg and flooded the area they were standing in.
“Shit! What are you doing?”
“Speeding things up by giving you an idea that this is something you don’t have a fucking clue about. Hopefully then I won’t have to hurt you too badly.” Jim put the barrel of the .45 against his own chest and pulled the trigger. He had braced himself so the gun blast only pushed him back a few inches. He maintained a hard stare at Pete throughout.
The bartender’s complexion paled to a sickly white. “Fuck,” he mouthed, his eyes dumb and as large as silver dollars, his jaw having fallen slack.
“You’ve got this one last chance before I start doing things to you.”
“Why’s this so important to you? Please tell me it’s more than you just wanting to rip them off?”
“It’s more than that,” Jim said. He swallowed hard to keep his emotions in check. “They took someone very important to me and they’re going to hurt her pretty bad if I don’t find them.”
Pete nodded to himself, accepting that. “The owner of the bar,” he said in a soft whisper. “Charlie Drum. He does some shit with them.”
The name of the bar was **The Broken Drum**. Jim asked if that was how the place got its name.
“Yeah, Charlie used to always be broke and bumming money off anyone he’d see here. Me, waitresses, customers, you name it. That changed a couple of years ago when all of a sudden he was flush every time you saw him. Started paying me more regularly too.”
Jim nodded to himself realizing that must’ve been the same time Drum hooked up with Raze. After a couple of years in business together there had to be some trust between the two of them.
“Alright. You’re going to call him and get him down here. You’re not going to warn him and you’re not going to do anything stupid. I know you don’t want people here to start dying, especially since you’d be the first one. Right?”
Pete nodded, his eyes half-lidded and staring at nothing in particular.
Jim handed him the cell phone he had taken off of Ash. The bartender stared at it and shook his head.
“Caller ID,” he said, finding his voice. “If I call with that phone Charlie will know something’s up. Better that I use the bar phone.”
“Okay, yeah, that makes sense. It’s a good thing one of us is thinking clearly. We’re going back out there now. Anyone asks you about the gunshots, you tell them a few bottles broke, nothing more, and you say whatever you have to to convince them that that’s what happened. Understand?”
Again, the bartender nodded. He asked, “What the fuck are you?”
“You don’t want to know.”
He nodded again, realizing that that was probably true.
Jim slid the .45 back in his waistband, zipped up his jacket and moved aside to let Pete leave the stockroom first. He followed Pete back into the bar area and stood close enough to hear the bartender explain to a couple of the patrons who asked about the noise that no, those weren’t gunshots, only a couple of bottles that were accidentally knocked onto the floor. They either bought his explanation or they didn’t care enough to challenge it. Pete went back behind the bar and Jim stayed close and listened in as the bartender left a message for Charlie Drum that he needed him at the bar pronto.

* * * * *

Serena garnered open stares when she and Zach went shopping at the XXX Sex Emporium and later at the Beachwood mall. She decided it was more her exotic and stunning look than anyone recognizing her from the video recording that was being shown all over the news. In celebrity-saturated Manhattan, she’d still catch people staring at her as if she had to be someone famous, but nothing like this; and the idea that some of these people might be wondering whether she could be the same person they watched on TV massacre all those cops left her throbbing badly between her legs. At one point she came within a hair’s breadth of pulling Zach into the ladies room at Nordstrom’s. It wasn’t easy but she controlled herself—as much as she needed relief she decided to wait until they returned back to their room so they’d have the space to go wild. The only downer to the evening was when Metcalf
had tried calling her. She’d been hoping that he’d stay holed up in his van and wouldn’t be bothering her for at least another twelve hours, but someone must’ve filled him in. She wondered briefly whether that someone could’ve been from her hotel, and the image of Walter Smith’s lizard-shaped face, along with his bulging and nearly lidless eyes popped into her head, but she discounted the idea and decided it had to be someone from Metcalf’s compound. As much as Smith tried hiding it with his false smiles and empty compliments, she had long suspected his animosity towards her but couldn’t imagine him being stupid enough to betray her like this, especially after her adding an expert computer hacker to the family six months earlier. If Smith did make the call through his cell phone (which he probably didn’t think she knew he had), she’d find out about it, and the consequences for him would be dire.

After shopping, they went back to Hayes’ hotel room, and she and Zach went at it as soon as the door closed behind them. Serena, her head pounding with desire, first shredded her leather pants as if they were nothing but wrapping paper, then did the same to Zach’s. It was a long time before they were done, and when they were, Zach lay on the floor with Serena mounted on top of him, his chest heaving as if it were going to explode, and her long black mane pulled in every direction as if she’d been caught in a windstorm, a wildness burning in her eyes. Hayes was lying only a few feet from them and was making a thin mewing noise as he writhed in agony. His hair had turned a stark white and his body had already grown leaner and more narrow. His head had changed also, taking on the same cat-like characteristics of every other infected vampire. Serena got off of Zach to check on Hayes.

“His bindings are threadbare,” Serena noted as she examined the cloth strips securing his wrists and ankles. “Another few minutes and he’d be breaking loose from them.”

Zach grunted an acknowledgement, then got to his knees so he could hold the PI’s wrists while Serena replaced the cloth bindings with handcuffs that she had bought at the sex store, then they did the same with Hayes’ ankles. After the PI was secured, Serena fed Hayes a pint of blood and that seemed to calm him down.

“I still don’t see why we need him,” Zach noted, his voice dripping with petulance.

Serena smiled wistfully at the other vampire, but didn’t bother with an explanation. It was always like this whenever she added a new member to their family. For whatever reason Zach had a difficult time with change, especially if it meant sharing her affections. She motioned for him to take a seat on a cushioned chair so she could join him on his lap. While they sat like that she played with his spent and limp penis. Even after humping more times than two caged rabbits, it didn’t take long to get him hard again. There was both a longing and a pleading in Zach’s eye; he wanted her again, but he wasn’t sure if he had anything left inside for another go around. She showed some mercy and left it alone. Instead she called Wilfred on his cell phone. After some pleasantries, she asked whether he’d had any luck finding the Blood Dragons.

“Not yet. We’ve been driving all over this hick city, but nothing yet.” Wilfred paused, then asked, “You and Zach have been fucking like crazy, haven’t you?”

“We’ve been christening every square inch of our hotel room,” Serena said, laughing. “Darling, how’d you know?”

“I could hear it in your voice. You don’t know how jealous I am right now. Or how hard.”

“I can imagine. Please do be careful walking about. You don’t want to be poking any holes in walls.” Her laughter died down. “Have you found anything about these Blood Dragons?”

“A little. Stefan and I have been going to nightclubs and spreading some money around. They’re a biker gang, and from what I’ve been told, very particular in what they ride. Only Harleys. They also sell drugs. Meth, heroin, acid. Stefan’s at one of the bars waiting to be hooked up with one of them for a drug buy. Right now I’m riding around looking for any bars with Harleys out front. Oh, and guess what? They all have the coolest tattoos to identify themselves. Skulls wrapped in barbed wire and flying dragons. We’ve got to get ourselves some. It would be the rage back home.”

“That biker-type Jim was feeding on when I hit him with the limo…” Serena pondered out loud. “I was wondering why Jim would be doing something so brazen like that right out in the open.”

“I was wondering about that too. So now we know. The guy he was feeding on had to’ve been a member of these Blood Dragons. If I remember right half his face was gone. Jim must’ve been trying to keep him alive so he could get information out of him.”

“We had one right under our noses. What a shame. Do you remember seeing this Blood Dragon afterwards?”

“Unfortunately, no. With all the commotion I didn’t bother looking for him.”

“Neither did I. Oh well, so we’ll find another one of them.”

“Probably Stefan before me.”

“My money’s on you, Wilfred. Keep doing what you’re doing. It all sounds very clever.”

Serena blew him a kiss over the phone and hung up. Zach was staring stone-faced, watching. “How about me?” he said. Serena caressed Zach’s cheek as she thought about it. “I’d like you to drive around and see if you can sniff Jim out,” she said. “If you do find him, don’t go after him alone. Jim is too dangerous and resourceful for that.
Call me, and we’ll handle him together.”

Zach nodded, hurt showing in his eyes over Serena’s assessment of his abilities. “How about you?” he asked.

“I’d better stay here,” she said, making a sour face. “I’m expecting company later tonight.”

“How about you?” he asked. “From whom?”

She sighed, her face for a moment ageing to something closer to death. “The same person who tried calling me earlier this evening,” she said.

“I don’t think so. How would he find you here?”

“Oh, he’ll find me. He’s very clever that way. And it would be best if I were alone when he does. My guess is he’s going to be a grouchy bear. To say the least.”

Zach nodded, still showing some hurt, and lifted Serena off of him so he could get dressed. He put on a pair of Hugo Boss jeans, a silk shirt, and a smart lightweight calfskin jacket that Serena had bought him at Bally’s.

“I’m going to find Jim,” he promised her. “Count on it.”

“If you say so, I believe you. And you’ll call me when you do?”

“Of course.”

He left the hotel room, and Serena gathered up her ruined clothing and took out a new skintight peach-colored leather outfit from her suitcase to peel over her body. She wanted to look her best for Metcalf. It had been a while, and nothing was better than angry sex—or as would be the case with Metcalf when he showed, psychotic rage-filled sex.

Chapter 11

Last call had passed leaving a small smattering of regulars and hanger-ons sitting around and nursing their drinks; some simply not wanting to go home, others looking for an excuse to mingle with the Bon Jovi cover band that had played earlier—although the band did mix in a few of their original songs. The four members of the band were all in their thirties, wore muscle shirts and torn jeans and styled their hair in the same sort of shaggy, teased manner of the members of Aerosmith. They were joking and talking loudly, trying to wind down with bourbons and draft beers after a lively three-hour set, and four young skinny girls who had come to see them—all of whom looked underage and were wearing tight tee shirts and either micro-miniskirts or shorts that were cut high up on the thigh, sat with them. There was no mistaking what these girls wanted, and their body language spoke loud and clear as they made sure to touch the band members knees and bare arms every chance they had. Jim observed all this blankly, his legs jiggling and his knees bouncing up and down. He turned his stare back at Pete. Jim had been there over five hours waiting for the bar owner, Charlie Drum, to show. During the course of the night he had Pete leave half a dozen messages for Drum, telling him it was urgent that he show up at the bar. The last message was left only a half ago, and at Jim’s suggestion, included something about there being a lot of money at stake.

“I think you should call him again,” Jim said.

Pete shrugged and tossed a couple of more aspirin in his mouth and chewed them slowly. Over the course of the night his skin color had grown waxy, his eyes pinkish. He looked feverish. He wasn’t doing too well with his broken hand, and had been dropping glasses throughout the night and struggling with the simplest bar activity.

“I already called too many times as it is,” Pete said, his voice tired and hoarse. “It wouldn’t do any good to call again. Probably just warn him that something was up.”

“You sure you don’t know where he lives?”

Pete looked up in amazement. This was the fourth or fifth time the guy had asked him that. “If I knew don’t you think I’d tell you already? Christ, Jim, I need to get to a hospital’s emergency room. My hand’s fucking killing me. I don’t know how much longer I can stay on my feet.”

Jim nodded, wiped the back of his hand under his nose. He knew that the bartender would’ve told him whatever he had to to get rid of him, but also that Pete was smart enough to understand that if he lied to him it would cost him dearly. Pete claimed all he had was his boss’s cell phone number, and when Jim tried calling information for an address, the operator told him she didn’t have one. She suggested that he try calling Drum’s service provider, although, she added, she didn’t think they would give him a home address. Charlie Drum sounded like an uncommon name to Jim, but when he checked the Cleveland phone books he was surprised to find seven Charles or C. Drums listed in the city and the surrounding areas. As the night wore on he considered taking Pete to each address, but he didn’t want to risk Drum showing up at the bar while they were gone and, as Pete pointed out, Drum might not even be one of those seven listed. The bar owner could instead have an unlisted home number.

“You know Drum. If you had to guess, what would you think—Cleveland proper, Westlake, Strongsville, Lyndhurst?” Jim asked, rattling off the towns where Charles or C. Drum had been listed.

“I don’t have a clue,” Pete said. “If we went hunting for him it would probably just be a wild goose chase, which I’m really not up to right now. My advice, we’re better off waiting here. Charlie a lot of times has late nights.
I’m still hoping he shows. The fucker better.”

“What about him?”

Jim pointed a thumb at another bartender cleaning up the back tables. The other bartender’s name was Simon, and he had shown up before the Bon Jovi cover band took the stage to help with the larger crowd that was expected. Simon was young, probably early twenties, and had a bulldog look about him complete with a thick squat body and a squashed nose. Ever since he had come to work, he glowered openly at Jim. He didn’t bother saying a word to him, but it was obvious he was wondering who the fuck Jim was and why he was sticking so close to Pete the whole night, and probably also why Pete was doing such a lousy job bartending.

Pete’s eyes focused slowly on who Jim was pointing at and he shook his head. Just like asking about whether he knew where Drum lived, this was the fourth or fifth time Jim had asked him about Simon. After the first time he appealed Jim by asking Simon if he knew how to get a hold of Drum or where Drum lived, even though he knew the other bartender wouldn’t have anything more than he did. Simon’s glower turned more suspicious at this point. “All I have is Charlie’s cell number,” he said. “Same as you.”

After that Simon kept his distance from the two of them, probably suspecting something was wrong about Pete and even more wrong about the strange-looking dude hanging around him. Maybe he thought that Jim was another drug dealer looking to muscle in on the territory. Whatever it was he just didn’t want anything to do with it, and he didn’t say another word to Pete that night.

“I already talked to Simon,” Pete said, trying to keep his voice as nonthreatening as possible, which was hard given how hoarse his throat had become. This wasn’t good—Jim asking the same questions over and over again. The guy was obviously losing it, which given that he had a big fucking gun on him and, among other things, was freakishly strong, was worse that just not being good—it was scary as hell. He still didn’t want to think about how this guy was able to shoot himself in the chest the way he did. Pete had been trying to tell himself all night that the guy had slipped a blank in, that it was part of an act to scare the shit out of Pete, but he couldn’t get himself to believe it.

“He didn’t know anything then and he doesn’t know anything now,” Pete continued, struggling hard to keep his eyes focused and a soft smile showing. “And there’s no reason that he would. He’s a college boy doing this part time. He keeps his nose cleaner than I do.”

The door to the bar opened and a large rotund man in his late forties with long greasy hair walked in. Pete nudged Jim, indicated that this was the Charlie Drum they were waiting for. Drum had a pasty look about him and his eyes the same glazed surliness that every drunk seems to have before throwing that first punch. He was pissed that he was there. His eyes caught Pete’s, then he spotted Jim and his expression shifted to something shrewd, as if he were reconsidering the last message that Pete had left him, and that maybe he was about to be introduced to a new business partner, one who could offer better terms than Raze. He winked at the two of them and wandered over to the band members where he shook their hands and flirted with the teenage girls sitting by them. While he talked to the girls he let his fingertips drop on their bare arms. He also touched their hair, rolling strands of it between his fingers and thumb. The girls didn’t seem to like it and their smiles turned plastic, but they didn’t say anything. He owned the place and could kick them out if he wanted to and then they’d have no shot at spending the night with the band. Jim tensed as he watched this. He started to get off his barstool, but Pete suggested he stay where he was. “Give it a minute,” he said.

It turned out Pete was right. No more than a minute later Drum looked bored with his flirting, most likely realizing it wasn’t going to lead anywhere, and he excused himself from the group to walk over to Jim and Pete. He winked at his bartender, a glimmer shining in his eyes.

“This the fella that’s so urgent for me to meet?” he asked, smiling broadly at Jim, his voice slurred. The smell of gin was heavy on his breath and his clothes were saturated with the pungent sweet smell of pot. He had obviously been smoking and drinking heavily all night.

Pete nodded, didn’t say anything.

“Business proposition?”

“That’s right,” Jim said. “We should talk alone. Just the three of us.”

Pete added, “I thought I’d just leave you two to talk—”

Jim stopped the bartender with a hard look. “Better that all three of us talk it over.”

Drum didn’t catch on to the look that Jim had given his bartender. Even if he had, he would’ve been too wasted to understand it. “How much we talking about?” he asked.

“Over a hundred grand,” Jim said.

Drum gave his bartender a questioning eye and Pete nodded, said that sounded right. Drum then turned to the rest of the room and announced that it was time for everyone to head home.

“Charlie, show us a little love,” the band’s lead singer implored. “We’ve been playing our arses off all night.
We need some down time, brother!”

The rest of the band murmured in agreement. Drum winked at Jim before turning back to the room. “Can’t do that, boys,” he said, sounding genuinely disappointed. “It’s already two-thirty. If one of the County boys shows up and sees me still operating and serving drinks at this hour, I’ll lose my license. But no reason you boys can’t continue this party in that van of yours you got parked in back. If it’s a rockin’, no one here’s gonna be a knockin’.”

He held out his hand to Pete, who handed him a full bottle of Maker’s Mark. Drum made a face, expecting Pete to have handed him a cheaper brand, but he corrected himself and was gracious as he gave the bottle to the lead singer. For good measure he also slipped the singer a baggie filled with pot which went quickly into musician’s pants pocket. The Bon Jovi wannabee nodded, asked about payment for the night.

“Check’s in the mail as always,” Drum said, smiling stiffly.

The musician accepted that and pushed himself to his feet. The rest of the band followed, grumbling as they headed to the door. The teenage girls with them didn’t seem to mind the change of location, each of them wrapping their arms around a different band member and helping guide them out of the bar. After they left, the rest of the exodus followed until it was just Drum, Pete, Jim and Simon. Drum nodded at Simon and told him he could leave, that he and Pete would lock up. Simon didn’t argue, and he moved fast to get out of there. Once they were alone, Drum asked Jim what he had. Jim unzipped his jacket and took his .45 out and placed it on the bar.

“Tell me where I can find Raze,” Jim said.

“What is this?” Drum asked, his smile strained. He turned to Pete. “You knew about this?” The bartender looked away, a film falling over his eyes. Drum’s expression changed as he realized what was happening. “You set me up like this?” Drum said to his bartender, his face growing beet red. “You cocksucker. You dirty ungrateful cocksucker. Guess what? You’re fired. I never want to see your pug ugly face here again.” He then turned to face Jim, his thick lips twisted into a sneer. “You’re going to shoot me, is that it, asshole? If you think I’m going to tell you bupkes—”

Jim poked Drum in the chest with his index finger and the blow sent the bar owner tumbling over one of the tables and crashing to the floor.

“Shut the fuck up,” Jim said.

Drum wiped a hand across his mouth. He pushed himself up into a sitting position.

“Where’s Raze?”

“How should I know? And go fuck yourself.”

Jim slid off his barstool. He made a fist and brought it down hard on the bar. The oak surface splintered, and Jim drove his fist nearly a foot through it. Drum watched this with a hard sneer, as if he were trying to figure out the trick. Slowly it dawned on him that there was no trick involved.

“I don’t know where Raze is,” Drum said, sobering up quickly, his tone subdued, his eyes unable to meet Jim’s. “We don’t socialize. We do business, that’s all. All I have for him is a phone number.”

“Call him then. Get him down here.”

“Tell me where I can find Raze.” Drum recited it slowly, methodically, as if he were having a tough time saying anything. Pete cleared his throat and asked if he could leave yet.

“Sorry, not until this is over.”

Jim glanced at the shattered bar and then at Drum. He didn’t have to say what was implied. Either Drum think of something, or he was going to end up the same as his bar. Drum nodded and took out his cell phone. He was having trouble dialing, though, shaking too much to press the right keys. He swore bitterly to himself after each mistake.

“Give me the phone,” Jim said. “I’ll dial for you. And don’t fucking die on me with a heart attack. A little while this will all be over for you. But you are going to need to find a new drug dealer after tonight.”

Drum tossed him his cell phone, his face chalk white. “On the news tonight,” he said. “You’re one of them that killed all those cops?”

“Not me. Raze’s number?”

Drum recited it slowly, methodically, as if he were having a tough time saying anything. Pete cleared his throat and asked if he could leave yet.

“Sorry, not until this is over.”

Jim started dialing the number but before he could finish someone was at the front door, rattling it, and Jim stopped what he was doing to look up. The door was kicked open, the wood frame splintering. It was a heavy door, a solid oak number, something that Jim had noted when he entered the place, and it shouldn’t have been able to be kicked in like that.

Zach walked in carrying a samurai sword. For whatever reason it didn’t surprise Jim. Just made him sick to his stomach.

“I spotted a Harley parked down the street,” Zach said to him, his eyes scanning the bar, taking everything in.
“That was careless of you, Jim. It warned me that you could be in the area. Otherwise I might not have taken the time to breathe in as deeply as I did.”

“You and that nose,” Jim said. “You’re in the wrong business, Zach. You could be in Provence putting all those truffle-sniffing pigs to shame.”

“Don’t knock it. I was able to smell you out. Because of that I’ve been standing outside listening for the last ten minutes. I’m curious, why do you need to get a hold of this Raze fellow? By any chance does he have something of yours? Your girlfriend, maybe?” Zach showed a crooked smile. “Sorry, Jim, but you won’t be around to get her back. I promise you, though, before we leave this ugly cow town of a city, we’ll find Raze for you, and I’m sure Serena will take extra special care of your girlfriend.”

“You won’t know who she is,” Jim said.

Zach’s lips pulled back revealing blood-stained teeth. “Oh, we will. We have a drawing of her.”

As the vampire talked he edged closer to Jim, moving from side to side like a sand crab before taking each small incremental step forward. He had his sword held over his head. He stopped within a foot of Drum, who lay cowering under a table. Zach addressed the bar owner, telling him for his own edification that it was actually he and his companions who massacred all those cops, that Jim didn’t deserve any credit for it. Then his sword came down, splitting both the table and the bar owner down the middle.

“Oops,” Zach said to Jim, his smile turning naughty. “Silly me. It doesn’t look like there’s any way for you to find this Raze now, even if you were able to walk out of here. Which you won’t be doing.”

Jim took the .45 from the bar and fired several rounds into Zach’s eyes, then kept shooting at Zach’s sword hand until the vampire dropped his weapon. Zach stumbled backwards, temporarily blinded, his cornea’s scratched by the bullets. Jim moved quickly to the dropped sword, picked it up, and swung at Zach’s neck like he was swinging a baseball bat for the fences. The blow struck solidly and sent Zach’s severed head flying. What was left of the dead vampire tottered for a moment on its feet before dropping like a load of timber. Jim stared at the dead body, wondering why Serena would send Zach alone after him. She’d have to know what the outcome would be. Fuck it, it didn’t matter. He had more pressing matters.

He went back to the bar to retrieve Drum’s cell phone. The number Drum had given was different than the one he had gotten earlier from Ash’s phone. That one must’ve been a disposable, this one had to be Raze’s business line. When he picked up the phone he saw Pete lying on the floor behind the bar with a large hole torn out of his skull. One of the bullets must’ve ricocheted and caught him. There was no question he was dead. Jim regretted that—he had started to like the guy, but there was nothing he could do about it. He used Drum’s cell phone to call Raze. The first call went to voice mail. Jim called again and this time Raze picked up, his voice druggy, out of it, as if he’d just woken up. Trying his best to imitate Drum’s easygoing Midwestern drawl, he told Raze that he was sitting on ten kilos and needed to see him right away at the Broken Drum. He hung up and didn’t bother answering Raze’s return call.

* * * * *

Jim found a set of car keys in Charlie Drum’s pockets for a newer model Chevy Monte Carlo parked out front of the bar. He drove the car further down the street, moving it under a street lamp that he broke so he’d be in the dark, then sunk down in the driver’s seat and waited with Zach’s samurai sword laying on the floor by the back seat. There was no use waiting in the bar or near the entrance; Zach did a good job demolishing the door frame when he broke in, and there was nothing Jim could do to camouflage the damage. The name of the bar was probably more accurate now than it had ever been. The door was broken, the oak bar was broken, tables were broken, the owner, Pete and Zach were all badly broken. When Raze or one of his Blood Dragons saw the busted up doorway they would know something was wrong and would take off. The best Jim could hope for would be to follow them. While he waited he slouched further down in his seat and examined the .45 automatic. The gun held two magazines, each able to hold nine rounds. There were six bullets left which should be enough, but he still wished he could get his hands on more ammo. It would come in handy if he ran into any more of Serena’s crew. He slid the magazines back in place and kept the gun within reach on the passenger seat next to him.

He heard the Harley before he saw it. As expected the driver slowed down enough to see that the doorframe was busted up, then did a quick one eighty and drove off. Jim couldn’t tell whether the driver was Raze or another biker. He was hoping it was Raze. He pulled the Monte Carlo onto the street and kept the headlights off as he followed. He tried to maintain a two-block distance. With his acutely sensitive hearing he could tell where the biker was heading even when he couldn’t see it. For twelve miles he was able to follow the bike this way without any problem, then he saw the bike pull down an alleyway, and when he drove up to it found that it was too narrow for the Monte Carlo. He thought about running after the bike, but instead stopped and listened, putting every ounce of energy he had into his concentration.

The world became still. In his mind’s eye he could see the turns the biker made, could picture them, and by
the time the engine was shut off, Jim had a good idea where the bike had stopped. Not too far away. He decided that the biker never realized he was being followed. Still, though, the area the biker led him to didn’t make sense to him. These were mostly tenement buildings; he expected Raze to be holding Carol in a safe house out in the burbs. It didn’t feel right to him, but it was the only lead he had. He got out of the car, taking the sword and gun with him. For a moment he stood paralyzed trying to wrack his brains over anything else he could do to smoke Raze out. If he had to he’d rob a bank the next day, but he couldn’t help feeling that Raze was fucking with him; that the guy wouldn’t trade Carol for any amount of money. How could he? Maybe Raze hadn’t realized it yet, but he had to have an idea of what he was dealing with; that if he had already hurt Carol there was nothing that could keep him safe once Jim found him. Which meant he couldn’t afford to let Jim find him, or for that matter, allow any swap. Maybe he just hadn’t realized it yet, but he would. Probably after he slept on it. It was everything Jim could do to keep from breaking out sobbing. He looked up into the hazy darkness as if he were beseeching the sky for answers. There were none coming, nothing but a sad dim moon overhead mostly obscured by haze and clouds. He would find the biker he had followed, and if Carol was being held someplace else, he’d do whatever he had to to make the biker tell him where she was. Whatever it took. Whatever...

Jim started running to the location where in his mind’s eye he had pictured the biker stopping, the blade of the sword reflecting the street lights, the .45 that he gripped in his other hand not much more than a grayish blur.

Chapter 12

It was three-thirty-six in the morning when Metcalf knocked on Hayes’ hotel room door. Serena let him in, a pale trace of a smile showing. Metcalf didn’t bother acknowledging her, just stared though her with empty eyes before moving past her. He barely seemed to notice Hayes laying on the floor, moaning softly, his wrists and ankles chained. Metcalf walked across the room, stepping over the PI, and sat in the chair that Serena and Zach had shared earlier. He appeared more haggard than usual, his cheeks sunken, the skin under his eyes colored a grayish-black, almost as if soot had been applied. Serena smiled thinly at him, her almond-shaped eyes as dull as sandstone.

“I hope you had a pleasant flight,” she said.

He shifted his empty stare to look at her. It seemed as if it were a struggle for him, as if the last thing he wanted to do was acknowledge her presence. “You don’t seem surprised to see me,” he finally said.

“Oh, darling, of course I’m not. Maybe a tiny bit surprised that you were able to find a flight so quickly out of LA—”

“San Jose,” Metcalf corrected her.

“San Jose, then,” she said, her smile stretching. “Always the stickler for details, aren’t we?” The sight of him brimming with all that violence excited her. It had been a long time since they’d been together. Thinking about one of their long-ago sessions made her face flush. She walked over to him and sat on his lap, her hand inching towards his waistband. Metcalf grabbed her wrist and stopped her. That surprised her and her eyes flashed dark for a moment, but she kept smiling, maybe even wanting him more than before. “Once I saw that you were trying to call me I knew you’d be heading here. And I knew you’d be clever enough to track me to my private eye’s hotel room. I assume you saw the CNN report?”

“Yeah, at the airport.”

“That was quite a video one of the bystanders made. Poor picture quality, but still very exciting. I could watch it over and over again.”

Metcalf squeezed harder on her wrist. Serena had the distinct impression that he was trying to crush her bone into powder.

“Let go, darling,” she said. “That is not very nice. And you know that I can be equally unpleasant if need be.”

“What are you trying to do, ruin us?” he asked, his voice cracking with rage, but he released his grip on her wrist. Serena slid off his lap and moved over to the bed. Sitting down, she leaned backwards so she could support herself by her elbows, her long legs dangling off the edge of the mattress. A surging violence had darkened his face and it left her throbbing between her legs. She had to take a deep breath before she could talk, her voice huskier, her soft lilt gone.

“Calm down, darling,” she said, her smile more of a tease than anything else. “No one is going to recognize me or any of my family from that video, so please don’t go all drama queen on me. It’s too late in the evening for that. Besides, that’s usually Zach’s job.”

Metcalf stared bullets at her. She smiled back but was beginning to lose some of her enthusiasm. Enough was enough already. Screw him. She sat up and crossed her legs.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“Oh probably no more than what you’ve already guessed. We decided to take a trip to Cleveland after all, and it’s a good thing we did. You should be thanking me, darling, you really should. It turns out our Jim has gone
berserk. He is completely out of control. We were driving on Euclid when what do we see but Jim out in the open feeding. This was in broad daylight, mind you. And as it turns out, he’s been doing far more than just that. If you watch any of the local news you’ll see that he’s also been ripping people’s heads off in motel rooms and their arms off in movie theatres.”

Metcalf stared open-mouthed at Serena as if she were nuts. Quizzically, he asked, “Why would he do any of that?”

Serena’s smile turned more into a cat-who-ate-the-canary variety. She told him Hayes’ guess about the Blood Dragons taking Jim’s girlfriend and the bloody aftermath that had since followed. To support this hypothesis, she showed Metcalf the drawing she had of Jim’s girlfriend. Metcalf looked intently at it and murmured that the girl was beautiful.

“If you like trailer-trash, I guess you could consider her okay.”

Metcalf shook his head, looked at Serena. “I know trailer-trash when I see it. This girl’s stunningly beautiful.” He put the drawing down, violence again darkening his features. “Why did you have to massacre those police officers?”

“It couldn’t be helped.”

Metcalf stared at her as if she had just sprouted horns. He dropped his face into an open palm and squeezed his eyes between his thumb and index finger. In a pained voice he asked her why it couldn’t be helped.

“It just couldn’t be.”

Metcalf sat for a while, frozen, then pushed himself out of his chair and paced the room, all the while squeezing his eyes. He asked Serena to explain why she couldn’t have helped it.

“There was nothing else we could do,” she said, shrugging. “They showed up while we were trying to deal with Jim. And then they started firing at us—and those bullets sting! We did what we had to.”

“You had to drink their blood in front of all those people?”

“Darling, we made sure they were dead first. We didn’t spread the infection, if that’s what you’re worrying about. And the sunlight, it was awful, it left us ravenous. Why let all that good blood go to waste?”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Think about it. Those people already saw Jim drinking a person’s blood, so it was no big deal what we did. They probably only thought we were all part of the same satanic cult. And that we must’ve been wearing body armor.”

Metcalf kept pacing, kept squeezing his eyes as if he were trying to fight back a migraine.

“What about the limousine?”

“What about it, darling?”

“The limo and its driver, that will connect back to you, won’t it?”

“No chance of that, darling. We had a previous arrangement with the driver where we always paid him handsomely for his discretion. Whenever we hired him it would always be off the clock so he could pocket the large sum of money we paid him. Even if the police are able to identify his body—which will be hard given that we removed his teeth and fingers, or the limo, which will also be hard after what we did to it, there’s nothing to connect him to us. And we burnt him and the limo to such a crisp before we left that there’s little chance anyone will ever identify him. There’s nothing to worry about, trust me.”

“What if someone saw him parked out in front of your hotel when he picked you up?”

Serena didn’t bother answering that. What was the point if Metcalf was going to ignore her explanations. After an uncomfortable silence, Metcalf asked her how large a party she brought from New York.

“Why?”

“Just answer me, okay?”

Serena counted silently to herself. “Originally five, including myself. Jim killed Henry, someone you never met so I know you won’t be shedding any tears over him, but he was a valued member of my family. Someone very good with swords. I believe he would’ve given you a run for your money.”

“Five of you and you couldn’t handle Jim?” Metcalf groaned, not bothering to hide his disgust.

“The sunlight, darling. We just weren’t used to it——”

Metcalf held out a hand to stop her. The swords that Stefan had cleaned earlier were left leaning against a wall. Metcalf picked up one of them and tested the sharpness of the blade with his thumb. He seemed satisfied with it.

“What about him?” Metcalf asked, referring to Hayes, all the while keeping his stare focused on the blade, at the way the light reflected off of it.

“Mr. Hayes was beginning to put things together——”

“Why infect him?”
The flatness and pure psychopathic edge to Metcalf’s tone left Serena stumbling for words. For the first time she was beginning to fear him. Any sexual desire she’d had earlier was gone and was replaced by an icy coldness that swirled through her body. Once she found her voice, she started babbling. “W-Why? Darling, I thought he could be a useful addition to my family, and that it would be a waste to simply dispose of him, same as I thought with you all those years ago. Besides, as I had already mentioned, I lost one of mine, so I don’t see why there would be a problem adding a new—”

Metcalf swung the sword downwards, lopping off Hayes’ head, then he looked up at Serena. She closed her mouth. She could see what he was considering, that he was trying to decide whether to cut off her head or to make her one of his experiments, weighing how difficult it would be to get her back to Los Angeles if he were to choose the latter. She backed away slowly and thought about the window. They were on the fourteenth floor. She wasn’t sure if she’d survive the fall—unlike Metcalf, she hadn’t spent years obsessed with those types of experiments. Somehow she knew he would know from what height a vampire would die if they fell to concrete, or would end up paralyzed or with broken legs.

“Darling,” she said as softly as she could, trying hard not to stammer—knowing that would be all that was needed to spring him into action, “why don’t you put the sword down? It’s been so long since we’ve co-mingled and there are so many things I’ve been dreaming of us doing. No one’s ever left me purring the way you did.”

“I thought Jim was always your favorite,” he said, his tone mocking her.

“No, darling—”

Metcalf put a finger to his mouth to quiet her and edged closer. She realized then that the window wasn’t an option—she’d never make it to the window in time. He would cut her down before she reached it.

Her cell phone rang and that seemed to break the trance that Metcalf had fallen into. His eyes changed, subtly, but they changed, almost as if a veil had been lifted, and he lowered his sword and stood quietly while she answered the phone.

“It’s Wilfred,” she said, fighting hard to keep the fear out of her voice, although she knew it didn’t much matter. Like a dog, Metcalf could smell it. “He knows where Jim is.”

The moment had passed. Metcalf let the sword hang loosely at his side. He nodded, his expression tired, an exhaustion filling his eyes. “Let’s go then,” he said.

He took the duffel bag and stored the sword in it so he could carry it out of the room without attracting attention. Jittery, her heart beating like a tom-tom, Serena followed him into the hallway. Slowly she got her nerve back, and whatever fear she had was replaced by a white-hot rage. Not only did he sexually reject her, but the sonofabitch psycho was going to kill her—or worse—and now had the audacity to act as if she should just forget about it and go on as if nothing had happened. She decided then that after they took care of Jim she was going to kill Metcalf. Maybe have Stefan cut his legs off first, but she was going to be the one to deliver the death blow.

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Jim found the Harley parked behind an apartment building. The building was different than the tenements that surrounded it; grander, older, as if at one time it had been a residence for a more moneyed crowd, but over the years had declined along with the rest of the neighborhood. While the other tenement buildings bordering it were brick, this one was stone, and had a cast iron gate surrounding it with each post topped off with a dagger-sharp spike. The gate was locked and a key was needed to open it. Jim scaled the gate, and once he reached the back door, used his shoulder to break it open. If anyone heard the noise, no one bothered to check it out.

Once inside he took out Ash’s cell phone and dialed Raze’s number—the one Drum had given him. The phone kept ringing until it would go to voice mail, then Jim would hang up and redial. He did this while he walked the hallway along the first floor, moving past each apartment, listening, then when he was done he would move to the next floor. At times, dogs would start to whine from inside an apartment, making distressed, agonizing noises, as if they were being tortured, but after Jim would move on their whining would stop. He repeated this at each floor until he reached the seventh and top floor. There he stopped outside an apartment where he heard a phone ringing from inside. Shortly afterwards he heard Raze’s voice complaining how the asshole just won’t stop calling.

“Why don’t you tell him to fuck off,” a different guy with a smoker’s rasp said.

“I’m not giving the asshole the satisfaction. Let him keep dialing all fucking night if he wants. It ain’t going to get him back his bitch.”

Jim stood silently trying to quiet the noise in his head so he could identify how many voices were coming from inside the apartment. He counted four. As he stood frozen, concentrating, he detected a familiar scent. Carol’s. She was in there, there was no mistaking it. Everything got so quiet then. He kicked the door in and found himself in an empty room. A Blood Dragon emerged from a connecting room, locked eyes on Jim, but before he could get a word out Jim fired off two shots, one missing wide, the other taking off a good chunk of the biker’s jaw. The gang member fell back into the room as if he’d been shot out of a cannon. Jim raced across the empty room into the one
the biker had fallen into. Raze was there with two other Blood Dragons, all of them looking wide-eyed at him, their faces pinched, surprised. One of the bikers leveled a shotgun towards the doorway and pointed it at Jim’s chest. Jim slowed down when he saw Carol lying on the floor. Her hands and feet were tied, a gag stuffed in her mouth, her eyes yellowish and in pain as they met his. He took a step towards her and was knocked back by a shotgun blast. The biker who shot him was grinning. Jim turned on him and the grin quickly faded. Before the biker could get off another shot he was dead, Jim’s sword slicing his chest open. Another biker lifted a Glock and fired rounds at Jim, who reacted to the bullets the way a man might push through a hail storm. He cut off the biker’s arm. The Glock still gripped within the biker’s dead hand continued to fire after it hit the floor, a half-dozen more rounds strafing the wall before the gun finally came to rest. The biker stared dumbly at his arm while Jim cut him in half at the waist. The only biker left was Raze. He was the same person with the fire-scarred face that Jim had ripped off in the men’s room the night before.

“Fuck you,” Raze said. He lifted a small black pistol, probably a 9 mm, and shot Carol in the side. It got so quiet in Jim’s head then. Fragments of time blipped away from him. He knew later he had killed Raze; he could see pieces of the biker’s body scattered across the room, but he couldn’t remember doing it. All he knew was that he was by Carol’s side; that the rag had been taken out of her mouth and the ropes tying her feet and hands had been cut away. He was holding her, trying to soothe her, whispering to her how much he loved her, but he couldn’t do anything to help her. Life was fading quickly from her.

“Don’t let me die,” she begged, her voice asthmatic, not much more than a whisper. His head was swimming. He tried to think of something to say to her, but there was nothing. She coughed weakly. Blood leaked from the corner of her mouth.

“Please, don’t let me leave you,” she forced out between ragged breaths. “Save me.”

“I can’t. Not that. Not to you.”

“Please…”

There wasn’t much left of her. He tried to kiss her lips, but she turned away to show him her throat. She pleaded again for him to save her. A heaviness sunk into his chest. He tried to explain why he couldn’t inflict that type of misery on her. That he loved her too much. She couldn’t talk anymore. Her voice was gone, but there was so much disappointment in her eyes. They told him that he had failed her.

From behind he heard someone applauding, then a woman’s soft lyrical voice saying, “Bravo.” He turned dumbly to see Serena. Next to her were two other vampires, both of whom seemed familiar, but his brain just wasn’t working. Serena stopped applauding so she could talk to the other vampires. He heard what she was saying, but her words didn’t register on him, nothing did.

They started moving towards him, and the way they were smiling at Carol he finally realized what they were planning to do to her.

The world slipped away from him. He had a vague image of himself flying at the shorter vampire, the one who held his sword as if he knew how to use it, then all that confidence draining out of the vampire’s eyes as he saw Jim pointing his .45 at his face, the vampire mouthing the word “fuck” just before Jim squeezed off three quick rounds, then swinging his sword low and slicing off the vampire’s feet and leaving him toppling to the floor.

The world came back. He recognized the vampire who was trying to get to Carol. Wilfred, one of Serena’s prized pets from the old days. Jim swung his sword at the vampire’s head. Wilfred dodged it but it forced him to move away from Carol. Jim raised his sword for another blow and was hit hard from behind. Claws raked his face, legs wrapped around him trying to break his ribcage. It was Serena. She had jumped on his back and the force of it sent him off balance and falling against a glass window. The glass broke. Before he fell through it he twisted his body and saw another familiar vampire standing in the room’s doorway. He was bigger than the others, harder looking, and as Jim crashed through the window he recognized Metcalf.

Then Jim and Serena were hurtling through the air. As they fell, she kept clawing at his eyes, her legs squeezing tighter. Jim twisted his body until she was underneath him. He saw the iron gate before they hit. The impact was jarring. Serena let go of him and he bounced onto the concrete sidewalk. He got to his feet, dazed, wondering why Serena appeared balanced on top of the gate. Then he realized one of daggers had impaled her and had sunk several inches into her body. She was stuck, there was nothing for her to use as leverage to free herself.

“Jim,” she said, gasping, trying hard not to show her pain. “Please, darling get me off of this and we’re even.”

Jim looked underneath her and saw where the dagger was sticking in. He couldn’t help smiling. He grabbed her and pulled her down, impaling her deeper until the dagger pushed through her chest. Even without the noises she made, he knew it went through her heart. He left her like that and headed back into the apartment building, racing up the seven flights of stairs and into Raze’s apartment. Metcalf was gone, as was Wilfred and the vampire whose feet he had cut off. So was Carol. The only bodies left in the apartment were the dead members of the Blood Dragons.

Jim stood staring blankly at where he had left Carol. A small puddle of her blood had pooled on the hardwood
floor. He tried to tell himself that she was dead, that Metcalf didn’t have the time to infect her, and that taking her body was nothing more than a ploy on Metcalf’s part to make Jim search for him—to make him think that there was a chance that Metcalf would turn Carol into one of his experiments. She had to be dead. He had to just think that, but the other thought nagged at him, sickened him.

The sound of sirens brought him back to the present. He looked out the window and saw waves of police cars descending on the building. It made sense that so many would come after the gunshots that were fired and everything else that had happened in Cleveland that day. He looked straight down. Serena was still impaled on the gate post below, still flapping about like a fish out of water. He left the bedroom and climbed out a window from the adjoining room. He scaled down the side of the building so he could leave unseen by the police.

Metcalf was bluffing. He knew that. Carol’s life was slipping away so fast before. Still, as long as there was any chance that Metcalf had her, he had no choice about what he was going to do. He was going to have to chase after Metcalf.

Police lights strobed red and blue against the neighboring buildings. He heard police officers coming his way to check the grounds. Jim ran then, first sprinting across the back lot of the neighboring building, then disappearing into the night.

Epilogue

Pearce broke out of a feverish dream. He stared up at the ceiling blinking wildly, disoriented, with no clue where he was. God he ached, god he was hungry. It was weird when he blinked, like only one eye was working, and fuck, his face felt funny. He touched the eye that didn’t seem to be working and felt only bone. It didn’t surprise him. His fingers moved down his face and he touched ragged skin and more exposed bone. Yeah, half his face was chewed up. So what? Somehow he knew it no longer mattered. He looked at his right hand and saw he was missing two fingers. Again, so what?

Fuck, was he hungry. Must be why he was moaning so loudly. Except the noise wasn’t coming from him. He pushed himself up onto an elbow. The room was mostly dark. A single fluorescent light flickered overhead, but it gave off enough light for him to see that there were two other guys in the room with him. One was much bigger than the other. He didn’t recognize either of them, but they both looked out of it the way they moaned and squirmed around on the floor. As Pearce watched them he found himself salivating. He crawled over to the bigger one and sunk his teeth into the guy’s neck. It was reflex, he didn’t even realize he was doing it until he was sucking up the guy’s blood. Then he was crawling off of him, retching, wave after wave of nausea rolling over him. He thought he was going to die, but after a while the intense agony subsided and he could breathe again. A lesson to be learned from that. These two he had to keep away from, but at some level he knew he needed to drink human blood. That that would be the only thing that would satisfy his hunger.

He remembered then about that weird skinny-assed freakshow guy from the other day—the one who robbed Raze, and later tore Zeke and Ash apart like they were cloth dolls. Pearce sat scratching his head, trying to make sense of it, and then he started laughing. Because he understood. He knew what he had become.

He staggered to his feet. Jesus, he had never been so damn hungry. He looked around, blinking, his remaining eye acclimating to the semi-darkness, and realized he was in a windowless basement. He made his way up a staircase, opened the door, and screamed like a baby when the sunlight hit him. Dropping to his knees, he crawled back down the staircase and away from the light. Fuck, it was like someone had tossed acid in his face. After a minute or so the pain went away. He understood then he’d have to wait until it was dark before he’d be able to satisfy his hunger. But smacking his lips he knew he’d eat well then. For the hell of it he decided to test out whether he had the same freakish strength that that other dude had. He punched the concrete wall and his fist cracked through it. He smiled at that. Yeah, fuck, he was going to eat well later. After the sun went down.

As it was he was hungry enough to eat a cow, or given his present condition, drain the blood out of a nice-looking broad. Make that a busload of them. Or a club full of strippers. Yeah, he was going to eat well later. No doubt.

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The story continues in Blood Crimes: Book Two.

**Bonus Section**

Bonus section includes: ‘More Than a Scam’ from 21 Tales, first chapter from Fast Lane, first chapter from Bad Thoughts, first section from the Shamus-award winning novella ‘Julius Katz’, first chapter from The Walk by Lee Goldberg and the prologue and first chapter from Dead and Gone by Harry Shannon.

**More Than a Scam (from 21 Tales)**

_The inspiration for this story were the ubiquitous Nigerian email scam letters I was receiving daily. At first I was_
planning to do the same as my story’s hero, namely record a correspondence with one of these scam artists, but instead I decided to go in another direction. More Than a Scam received honorable in the 2003 edition of Best American Mystery Stories.

It really all started with the email I received. The message was marked “Urgent/Confidential” and was from one Celestine Okiti, who claimed to be a senior accountant with the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Finance. The gist of the email was that ten and a half million dollars was sitting in a Nigerian bank account and she was looking for a partner to pose as the next of kin of some dead foreign contractor so she could get the money out – and that my cut would be four and a half million dollars, minus expenses.

Of course it was a scam. It was too silly to be anything else, and besides I had read about this years ago. The “pigeon” who went for his four and a half million cut would be asked to put up some money to show good faith and to cover the expenses. It was a pretty simple and childish scam, one that makes you wonder how anyone in the world could fall for it, but still, I was fascinated by that email. It got my mind spinning on different crime story scenarios.

I guess I should tell you a little about myself so that this makes some sense. My name’s Dan Wilson. I’m thirty-eight, live in a suburb near Boston, been married ten years, and have a pretty boring job processing insurance claims. In order to keep my sanity I write crime stories in my spare time. Usually I write hard-boiled PI stories, sometimes crime caper stories. I’ve had limited success. I’ve sold a couple of stories to print magazines and have given away a fair number of them to online Internet magazines.

I sat for a good two hours staring at Celestine Okiti’s message, playing out different story ideas in my mind. The one idea I kept coming back to was responding to her email message, pretending to be a pigeon, and then writing up the exchange of emails as a story. I didn’t do anything, though, at least not then. By the time I gave up it was one in the morning. I didn’t want to wake Cheryl so I slept in the guest room.

The next morning as I sat drinking coffee my mind raced with different possible Nigerian bank scam stories. I didn’t notice Cheryl had come into the room until she sat across from me with her yogurt and newspaper. She seemed too absorbed with the newspaper – and I guess I was too deep into plotting my story – for us to say much to each other. After I finished my coffee I headed off to work.
After three days of working out different scenarios in my mind, I decided on a plan of action. Instead of replying back to the email as a “pigeon”, I would instead create my own scam. I have written stories with a roguish conman named Pete Mitchel. For the hell of it I decided to use his identity. I created an email account for Pete and wrote an email back to Celestine Okiti, telling her how fortuitous it was that she had contacted me, that I worked in the office of a large construction company, and that a Nigerian national died on the job several months ago and seven hundred and twenty thousand dollars in death benefits were sitting there waiting for a next of kin. I told her that I was planning a trip to Nigeria to find someone who could pose as the dead man’s next of kin, but Celestine could save me the trouble. I further explained that I wasn’t greedy, that ten percent, or seventy-two thousand dollars, would be all I wanted.

I sat in front of my computer for several hours with my email message typed out, trying to decide whether to send it. Of course, the scam letter they sent to me had been sent to thousands of other addresses, probably from a purchased email list. They’d have no idea whether or not an email was originally sent to a Pete Mitchel, nor would they check. As I was trying to decide what to do with the email, Cheryl walked into the room and interrupted me. She told me it was late, that she had to get up early the next day, and asked if I’d be quiet when I went to bed. She looked tired, a little worn out. I told her not to worry, that I’d sleep in the guest room again. After she left, I stared at the email message for another thirty minutes, and then sent it.

I didn’t get a response for several days. I must’ve checked my email a few hundred times before I found a reply from Celestine Okiti. She thanked me for the opportunity that I presented, but insisted that her opportunity was urgent and was far more lucrative. She wanted me to contact her right away so that I could reap my four and a half million dollars, minus expenses of course.

I had already worked out in my mind what my next step would be if I heard back from Ms. Okiti. First, I used a travel web-site to book a flight to Nigeria for my fictitious Pete Mitchel. I then sent her back a reply stating that I knew her proposal to me was a scam, but that I considered it good fortune that she had contacted me when she did, possibly saving me from a trip to Nigeria that I wasn’t anxious to take. I told her, though, that time was running out for me to collect the insurance money and that I had booked a flight for the following week to Nigeria so that I could find a local who could pose as the dead man’s next of kin. I passed along all the flight information, and told her if she changed her mind she could let me know, but that time was running out.

I didn’t expect a reply to my email. I guess I must have been feeling a bit queasy about the whole thing and at a subconscious level had decided to put a stop to it. I was more than a little surprised when I got a terse reply back from Ms. Okiti to fax her a copy of the dead man’s death certificate and the insurance policy.

The insurance policy was easy. I was able to get a fairly realistic policy printed up in no time. The trick was filling in all of the contact information and then blacking it out with a pen. As far as the death certificate, I found samples on the Internet, and then used a graphics package on my computer to create a fairly realistic looking one. It took some time, but I was happy with the results. I faxed both of them to the number I was given.

Over the next four days we went back and forth over a number of issues until we were able to settle things. First, Celestine Okiti wanted to pay me my ten percent cut after she received the insurance money. I flatly refused, reminding Celestine Okiti that her and her associates were scam artists, hardly to be trusted. With the deadline of my booked flight approaching, she finally gave in. The next issue was how my ten percent was going to be sent to me. They wanted to send a check and I wanted them to wire the money to a bank account that I had opened for Pete Mitchel (I had obtained a fake driver’s license for Pete Mitchel which is actually quite easy to do in Massachusetts, and had used it to open a bank account). Since they gave in on the other matter, I gave in on this one. I rented a mailbox in Pete Mitchel’s name and sent Celestine Okiti the address.

During those four days, I guess I must have been acting somewhat manic. I could tell Cheryl knew something was up, but I didn’t want to tell her anything. She’d think I was nuts and wouldn’t be at all happy with what I was doing. She tried a couple of times to ask me what was keeping me so occupied, and I just told her that I was working on a new crime story. I could tell she was annoyed, but she left it alone.

To be honest, I never expected them to send a check. Even when I called up the store where I rented the mailbox and was told that I had a letter waiting for me, I still didn’t believe that they would send me a check. But when I picked up the letter and opened it, there it was. A check for seventy-two thousand dollars made out to Pete Mitchel. I drove home and put the check in my desk drawer. I then sent Celestine Okiti an email message, telling her that after the check cleared I would send them the necessary documentation to collect the insurance money.

I had a restless night as I tried to decide what to do. The next morning, though, I drove to Pete Mitchel’s bank and deposited the check. Over the next couple of days, Cheryl made comments about how quiet I had gotten. I couldn’t tell her about what had happened, so I told her I had some stuff going on at work.

After I heard the check had cleared, I transferred the money to a Swiss bank account I had opened up. I also destroyed Pete Mitchel’s email account. I kept the email messages, though. I was still planning on using them for a
Things pretty much settled back to normal after that. About a week later I had gotten home early from work and was sitting at my computer when the doorbell rang. There were two black men standing outside my door. My guess they were Nigerians. They were both tall, thin. Both were wearing slacks and polo shirts. Either one or both of them had on a heavy, musky cologne. The smell was overpowering. Both of them looked angry.

“We’re here for our six hundred and forty-eight thousand dollars, Mr. Mitchel, or should I say, Mr. Wilson,” the one closest to me said.

So they had tracked me down. They must’ve been waiting at my rented mailbox and followed me home after I had picked up the check. I looked at the two of them scowling at me and I just started laughing. “I can’t believe you fell for my scam,” I told them. “Especially since it was so much like your own scam, using the same next of kin angle. Jesus, how stupid can you be?”

They both looked stunned. I watched with amusement as my words seeped in and the anger in their faces boiled into pure hatred. It was shining in their eyes. “We want our money, now!” the same man demanded, his voice rising.

My neighbor, Carl Moscone, had opened his door and was staring at us, making sure everything was okay. Moscone is a retired Boston Cop. He’s a big man, almost as wide as he is tall. I waved at him. The two men on my doorstep noticed him also.

“You’re not getting a dime,” I said, still laughing softly. I couldn’t help it. “You know, at first I was just playing around, seeing if I could get enough emails to get a good crime story. It never occurred to me that you would actually send me any money. But now I’m having fun. And I’m going to have even more fun spending your seventy-two thousand dollars. First thing I’m going to do is buy my wife a very expensive mink coat. Every time she wears it I’ll think of the two of you standing there looking like saps.”

The two men were aware of Moscone staring at them. It seemed to effect them. The man closest to me asked in a low voice how I would like it if he called the police. That just made me laugh harder. The harder I laughed the more infuriated they both got, but I couldn’t help it. It took a few moments before I could talk.

“I’ll call them for you right now if you want,” I said when I could. I had to wipe tears from my eyes I was laughing so hard. “I’ll show them all the emails that went back and forth between us. I’ll explain to them how I decided as a lark to see if I could scam you instead, and how you actually fell for it. I’m sure they’ll get as good a laugh out of it as I am. You want me to call them?”

Neither of them said anything.

All of a sudden the amusement had dried up within me. “Get out of here,” I said, now dead serious. “If I see either of you again I will call the police.”

“It is not over,” the one closest to me said. “We will get our money.” And then they both turned and left. I watched as they got into their car and drove away, then I went next door and shot the breeze with my neighbor. He asked about the two men. I told him they were scam artists who struck out with me, and left it at that.

The next day I had a bunch of issues pop up at work. It took me until seven that night before I had them under control, and I didn’t get home until eight. When I opened the door I couldn’t help noticing how quiet it seemed. I called out for Cheryl and got no answer. There was a light on in the kitchen. I walked in and saw the butcher knife lying on the counter top. Its edge faced me and I could see a red smudge running along it. Then I spotted the severed finger. It took me a moment to realize what it was. I don’t why. I guess it looked like a finger, but it just seemed odd lying there. It was placed on top of a note. The note was written in small, neat letters, and informed me that if I wanted to get my wife back without any more missing parts I had better pay them the money I owed them. The note ended by asking if I was still laughing. I picked up the phone and called the police.

The detective looked incredulous as I told him the whole story. I showed him all of the emails – the ones I had received and the ones I sent. I didn’t leave anything out. I told him about the fake documents I created, the bank account for my fictitious Pete Mitchel, the rented mailbox, the seventy-two thousand dollars, I told him everything. When I was done he had me tell my story to another detective, and after that to an FBI agent.

It turns out the police found Cheryl less than three hours after I had called them. It was probably due to a combination of the Nigerians being sloppy, since this was most likely their first kidnapping, and not considering that I would call the authorities. In any case, my neighbor Moscone had written down their license plate number from the day before, and they had used the same car for the kidnapping. The police found them in a small house in Chelsea. They had hacked Cheryl into pieces and were in the process of packing the pieces into boxes when the police broke in. I guess they were planning on mailing Cheryl back to me, piece by piece, after I paid them their money.

At the time the police didn’t tell me anything, and I didn’t find out about Cheryl until the next day. That night they took me in for more questioning. I was asked several times if I wanted a lawyer, and each time I declined. At one point I was asked if I’d be willing to take a lie detector test. I told them I would. They then left me alone for
several hours. I was then brought to another room, hooked up to a polygraph, and questioned. I answered each question truthfully, and they seemed satisfied with the results.

I think it was past nine o’clock the next morning when I met with the District Attorney. He looked uncomfortable as he told me about Cheryl. It was the first I heard of it and it took a moment for it to register. When I finally made sense of what he was saying, I just started sobbing. I couldn’t help it and I couldn’t stop myself. I just sat there sobbing uncontrollably, sobbing until it felt like my chest was going to break apart.

In the end the District Attorney decided not to press charges against me. While I acted criminally in trying to defraud the Nigerians, it was hard to muster much sympathy towards them. He was also convinced that I didn’t intend for any harm to come to Cheryl. When the Nigerians were arrested they had confessed fully and bitterly, explaining why they had hacked my wife to pieces. The D.A. decided not to hold me criminally negligent, even though in his opinion I acted stupidly. We agreed that I would turn over the seventy-two thousand dollars to a local youth group. I think it really got to him the way I reacted when I heard about Cheryl. He knew my reaction was genuine, he knew I wasn’t faking it, but he completely misunderstood the reason behind it.

I was lucky to pass the lie detector. I was lucky that all they were trying to do was verify my statement, and I had been completely truthful with my statement. If they had had some imagination I would’ve been sunk. To be honest I never expected the Nigerians to send me any money. Up until the point where they told me they were mailing me the money, I was just playing around. But from that point on I guess my mind was spinning with different ideas of how I could make it more than a scam. I knew that they wanted to send a check instead of wiring funds to my bank so that they would be able to follow me when I picked up the money. And I saw the Nigerians watching my mailbox when I picked up the check. I saw them when they were following me home; I even slowed down several times so I wouldn’t lose them. And I had no intention of spending any of that seventy-two thousand dollars on a mink coat for Cheryl. I told them that to infuriate them, to give them ideas. And I found reasons to stay late at work to give them time to do what they were going to do.

The thing of it was Cheryl and I had drifted apart over the years. We didn’t really talk much any more, and we didn’t really like being with each other. It had been over a year since we’d had sex, and even longer since I cared about it. A divorce would’ve been costly and unpleasant. So while I had to give up the seventy-two thousand dollars, I was paid six hundred thousand dollars from her life insurance policy. Her parents are now suing me for it, claiming I negligently contributed to her death, but my lawyer doesn’t think they have much of a case. I’m not worried about losing the money.

No, the D.A. wasn’t even close to understanding why I broke down the way I did. It had nothing to do with Cheryl’s death. It just hit me all of a sudden as to what I had done and what I had become. It took me a while to get used to it. But I’m fine now.

Fast Lane (Chapter 1)

If I was lucky Debra Singer was still in Denver, and if she was, East Colfax would be a good bet. East Colfax was always a good bet for runaway teenagers.

Every major city’s got its East Colfax. In Los Angeles it’s Hollywood Boulevard, in New York it’s Times Square. In Denver it’s East Colfax. As I drove down it, I spotted Rude at the corner of Nineteenth Street smoking a cigarette and staring into the distance. Rude works as a bouncer at a strip club a few doors down. He also pimps for a couple of the dancers. When he was in Vietnam he was assigned to an elite unit where he’d be let loose into the jungle to return two or three months later with a bunch of Vietcong ears tied to a rope. Now he can’t stay cooped up for too long, needs to get out every half hour or so for some fresh air. I once tried arguing that the air inside his strip club was a hell of a lot fresher than the smog around Denver, but he failed to see the logic of it.

I pulled up alongside him. He looked past me, inhaled deeply on his cigarette, held the smoke in, and let it out slowly through his nose. “If it isn’t the famous celebrity detective, Johnny Lane,” he said in a soft, menacing growl. “Read your piece in the Examiner. Used it to mop up some coffee.”

“Well now, everyone’s a critic these days.”

I parked and got out of the car. As I approached him, I noticed his handlebar mustache had gotten thicker and grayer, looking more like a steel brush than ever. He took in another lungful of smoke and swallowed it down.

“I hear there’s dissension in the ranks,” he said. “One of the private dicks you hire was bitching to me. Thinks you’re taking advantage of him.”

I waited for him to go on but he was finished. He spat on the sidewalk before turning back to me. His face had the hard, dispassionate look of a granite block.

“I got to tell you,” I said, “that’s just not true. I’m upfront with everyone I hire. And you know, Rude, it’s really just generosity on my part that I subcontract my overflow cases. But you’re always going to have your complainers no matter how good you are to people.”
“He told me you take sixty percent off the top. That’s not very generous, Lane.”

“Yeah, well, I disagree.” I was starting to feel a little hot under the collar. “Look, I don’t put a gun to anyone, understand? If your guy can do better, let him.”

A thin smile cracked Rude’s face. “Hey man, don’t get excited. Just telling you what was said. You don’t have to convince me of anything.”

“Who’s complaining about me?”

“I’m not going to betray a confidence.” He took a final deep drag and flicked his cigarette away, his eyes half-closed and peering off into the distance.

“Sure. Anyway, that’s not why I’m here.” I handed him a photo of Debra Singer. “Know her?”

Rude studied it slowly. “Fresh meat,” he said, nodding. “In a few months, though, there’ll be maggots coursing through her flesh.” His eyes shifted to meet mine and for the first time in all the years I’d known him I saw a glint of life in them. “That’s a hell of a lot better prose than the crud you write,” he added sourly.

“I won’t disagree with you.”

“Maybe I should talk to your editor. If he’s going to publish crap like ‘Fast Lane’, maybe he’d be interested in something good. Something real. The Rude Streets, stories of the Hardluck.”

“Won’t sell,” I said. “You need a sympathetic hero. Someone for the reader to relate to. Not too many folks are going to relate to a sociopathic, sleazebag pimp.”

“But they relate to you, huh?”

A blond teenage girl wearing a belly shirt and hot pants walked out of a massage parlor across the street. I made sure she wasn’t Debra Singer before turning back to Rude. “Look,” I said. “I’m not making up the rules. Just telling you what they are.”

“I’m a war hero, godammit!”

“Yeah, you’re a fine, upstanding citizen.” I took Debra Singer’s photo from him. “How about the girl? Where can I find her?”

Rude pressed his eyes shut. Lines of concentration ran down his forehead like grooves running down granite. “She’s working at a peep show across from the Cabaret Club,” he said after a while. “Fresh meat’s working the private booths. For a buck she’ll take her panties off. After that, a buck a minute and she’ll play with herself so you can jerk off.”

I felt a little sick hearing it, but it could’ve been worse. At least she wasn’t working the streets. I thanked Rude and handed him forty bucks. He looked at his watch.

“Tanya’s on stage in five minutes,” he said. “You should come in for the show, Lane. This girl’s really something. She can pick up a roll of quarters and count the change.”

“Yeah, well, I got more than enough change as it is. And as my poppa used to say—”

He groaned. “Not one of your folksy little sayings, Lane. It’s too early in the day.”

“Funny you say that, cause my poppa—”

“Cut it out.”

“Well now, it’s too bad you feel that way. Cause, as my poppa used to say, maybe you would’ve learned something. But—”

There was no point going on. He had already shut himself off to me. As I moved away, his gaze shifted, staring into some godforsaken world that not too many people were privy to.

It bothered me that someone was complaining about me, and it didn’t make any sense. At least none that I could see. My one-man operation handles a large caseload, larger than most ten-man agencies, and the way I do it is by subcontracting my overload cases. Of course, ideally my clients want me to handle things personally, but they’re usually satisfied with knowing I’m involved, even if it’s only at a supervisory level. I guess it comes from the trust they develop reading about me over the years in the Denver Examiner.

Regardless of what Rude thought, the forty percent I pay when I subcontract a case is more than fair, especially when you consider that forty percent of my four-hundred-a-day charge is roughly what the smaller operatives can get on their own. You see, what my clients are paying for is my name, reputation, and expertise. Not for some nameless private dick they couldn’t care less about.

I decided I couldn’t help it if someone was going to be unreasonable, and I put it out of my mind.

The peep show Rude pointed out was a quarter of a mile further down East Colfax. There weren’t any parking spaces out front so I double-parked next to a Mercedes with an MD license plate. Before I made it into the establishment, a huge hog-like farm boy came puffing out of the peep show and blocked me.

“Hey, Buddy,” he said. “You gotta move your car.”
He wore a stained tee shirt and dungaree overalls that probably could’ve held ten forty-pound sacks of potatoes. They fit snugly on him. I told him I was just going to be a minute.

“Sorry.” He nudged me with his belly. I couldn’t help noticing his small pink rat’s eyes. “The cops will be down my neck if you block traffic. Go ahead and move your car. The girls will wait.”

He had a sick, oniony smell. I backed away from him and showed him Debra Singer’s photo. “I’m looking for this girl,” I said.

His eyes grew smaller and meaner. He moved towards me and bumped me again with his belly, pushing me back a foot. “She’s busy,” he said. “Why don’t you get lost?”

“She’s a minor. Bring her out here now or I’ll close your place down.”

“She told me she was eighteen,” he said stubbornly.

“Sorry, Tiny, she’s only sixteen. Look, your smell is making me nauseous. Why don’t you go get her?”

He stared at me. “I don’t like that name. You think it’s funny because of my size, huh?”

“Well now,” I said. “That didn’t have anything to do with it. I just heard some of the girls talking about you.”

He gave me a sullen stare as he tried to make up his mind about something. I guess he finally decided my crack wasn’t worth worrying about. He headed back into the peep show. I waited on the sidewalk for a minute and then stepped inside.

It was dark. It took a moment before my eyes focused on a sign indicating private booths in the back. As I turned the corner I walked into a room with about a half-dozen girls sitting on a cheap brown sofa, the oldest of whom couldn’t have been more than twenty. They didn’t look happy. One of them glanced up at me and licked her lips. Then I heard the commotion coming from behind them.

Tiny pushed his way through the red curtains separating the room from the private booths, dragging Debra Singer behind him like he was pulling a bed sheet. All she had on were a pair of panties. Tiny jerked her to her feet and shoved her into the middle of the room. She collapsed onto the floor, sobbing, pleading with him.

“Go on,” he said, a satisfied smirk twisting his little mouth. “Get her out of here.”

My hands balled into fists. “You could’ve let her put some clothes on,” I said.

Tiny took a small step back and wiped some sweat from his forehead. “You told me you wanted her right away, didn’t you? Now get her out of here! And I better never see your face around here again!”

One of the girls had run to the back room and retrieved a pair of jeans and a halter-top and was helping Debra into them. Another one had gotten her a pair of sneakers. Debra looked like a stick that could be broken in half by stepping on it the wrong way. I took a deep breath and felt my hands relax. Tiny stood cautiously watching me.

The two girls finished dressing Debra. One of them was rubbing Debra’s face with a towel. She had stopped sobbing. Her eyes were blotchy, the rest of her face, pale and bloodless. I walked over to her. “Come on, honey,” I said. “Let’s go.”

She let me lead her out. The way the sunlight hit her as she stepped outside, you could see her skull shining through her skin. There just wasn’t enough flesh on her. As she walked ahead I counted the vertebrae running down the back of her neck. She was so damn skinny and gawky. Her hips had barely begun to develop into a woman’s. Thinking about what she had been doing in there, I almost turned around and sought Tiny out.

As I started to drive off, he stepped outside, shaking his fist and yelling. I looked over my shoulder and caught his eye and then put the car in reverse. He disappeared back into the peep show.

Debra had been sitting quietly, pale blue eyes staring blindly at her feet. All of a sudden she tried to bolt. I grabbed her around the waist and reached across her and pulled the door shut. She resisted for about a ten count and then her body went limp.

“I’m not going back,” she stated in a barely audible monotone.

I drove until I was able to pull over. Then I turned and looked at her. A thin pale blue outline of veins crisscrossed her temples. “Honey,” I said. “Your parents are worried sick about you.”

She started to giggle and then bit her lip. “I’m not going back. I’ll kill myself if you make me go back.”

It was getting close to noon. Up ahead a couple of hookers were getting ready for the lunchtime crowd, disguising their sores with makeup and pulling their pants tighter against their crotches. I wanted to get Debra out of there as quickly as I could. “Why don’t we talk about it over lunch?”

She didn’t answer me.

I heard her teeth chattering and saw that she was shivering. “I got a jacket in the trunk. Would you like me to get it for you?”

She didn’t bother to answer. “What drugs are you doing?”

Still nothing from her. She had her hands clasped in her lap. I glanced at her arms and didn’t see any needle marks. I drove downtown, towards the Financial District, and was able to find a parking spot outside the Corner Diner.
Carol was working the counters. She waved us over, but I indicated I was going to take a booth. I noticed her eyeing Debra as we made our way to the back of the diner.

Carol came over with a couple of menus and a dishrag. “Hi, Johnny,” she said as she leaned her cute body forward and wiped the table. “I really enjoyed your column last month.”

“You didn’t use it to mop up spilled coffee?”

“No way. I saved it. Maybe you could autograph it for me later?”

“Sure. Thought I saw you working the counter today.”

“I am.” She started blushing. Red looked nice against her blond hair. “But it’s not busy yet, so I thought I could handle a table. Is this, uh, your niece?”

I guess I must’ve been annoyed at the way she had looked at Debra earlier because I smiled broadly and told her Debra was my new girlfriend. Debra let loose with a giggle and Carol’s blush turned a deeper red. I felt bad as soon as I said it. Carol was a good kid, always cheering me up when I needed it, and with the type of cases I was taking these days I needed it more and more.

“That’s not quite true,” I told her. “She’s someone who’s had some tough luck recently. I’m taking her back to her parents as soon as she has a good meal in her.”

Debra’s smile dropped, leaving her face pinched. Carol turned to her and put a hand on her shoulder. Debra shrank back from it.

“You poor thing,” Carol said. “What do you feel like eating?”

“Nothing.” Debra murmured.

“Get her a cheeseburger and a chocolate milkshake,” I told Carol. “And how about getting me your meatloaf plate? Think you can hide some extra mash potatoes on it?”

“I’ll think of something,” Carol said, flashing me a grin as she took the menus and headed back.

Debra started tearing at one of her fingernails. “You’re the detective in the newspaper,” she said without looking at me.

“That’s right. Ever read my stuff?”

“Yeah, it’s okay.”

“Everyone’s a critic these days.” I leaned forward. “Honey, they really are worried sick about you. When I met with your daddy today he didn’t look too well.”

She giggled again and then looked up at me, her eyes stone hard. “I bet he didn’t call the police.”

I didn’t know whether he had or not. “Why do you say that?”

“You’re the detective. Figure it out.” She looked down at her nail and continued to tear at it.

“You don’t think your daddy’s worried about you?” Her lips started moving, but she didn’t say anything.

A sickish feeling pushed into my stomach. Carol brought the food. I pulled her aside and asked if she could watch Debra while I made a phone call. She said sure, and told me I could use the phone by the cash register.

I called a Denver cop I knew and asked if a missing persons report had been filed for Debra Singer. He told me to wait a minute and he’d check. When he came back, he told me there wasn’t. “Is she missing?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.” I hung up and went back to the table. Debra was nibbling on her burger, barely making a dent in it. I had lost my appetite. I waited until she put down the burger, and then asked her why she’d run away.

She looked up and saw that I knew. Her face looked pale and pained. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Honey, what did he do to you?”

“What do you think?” she asked in a tiny whisper. And then she told me.

I had half suspected it when her daddy hired me. I guess I tried convincing myself it was the way he had explained it. I wanted to believe it was that way, that Debra was a troubled kid who had gotten into drugs and other bad stuff, but if I could bring her back, him and his wife would do whatever it took to straighten her out. If only I’d find her and bring her back . . . .

If only it could’ve been that way. With all the lowlife cases I’d been handling recently, I needed it to be that way. I needed a chance to do some good for a change. Rescue the lost, wayward daughter. Bring her back to her heartsick parents. Instead I was right back in the gutter, scraping my nose against it.

Debra was describing the abuse, about how it began when she was seven and how it had gradually progressed. As she talked, her small face tightened, her words coming out in an angry rush. Inside I was reeling.

Tears had started to well up. One of them broke free and rolled down her cheek. It took a while before I could find my voice and ask whether her mother knew.

“She couldn’t care less,” she said. Her bottom lip looked like it was about to give way.

“Now, honey, that couldn’t be true—”

“I said, she couldn’t care less!” she screamed. “She couldn’t care less! How many more times you want me to say it?”
She pushed her burger away and dropped her arms and head to the table, sobbing. “You should’ve left me alone,” she forced out, her words choked and anguished. “I had a glass wall separating me from them. No one was going to touch me there.”

I told her I’d help. That I’d work things out. My words sounded silly but there wasn’t much else I could say. Carol came over and asked if everything was okay. I didn’t answer her. She sat next to Debra, and Debra turned and fell against her and started sobbing harder than before.

I sat and watched for a while, the sickish feeling in my stomach knotting my insides. Then I got up and called Craig Singer. I told him I’d found his daughter, but there were some problems and I needed to talk with him. He asked whether he should have his wife join us, and I told him it would probably be better if she didn’t. A hesitancy crept into his voice as he asked how Debra was. I told him we’d better talk about it in person and we agreed to meet at his home in a half hour.

I walked back to the table. Debra had stopped crying, but it looked like she could start up again any moment. The short order cook yelled out to Carol that food was stacking up. I asked her if she could keep an eye on Debra.

“It could be a while before I come back, but it’s important.”

Carol looked uncomfortable. “I’ll try, Johnny. I have to get back to work, though.”

I gave Debra a weak smile. “Stay put,” I told her. “Everything will be just fine. I promise you that.” She looked away.

* * * * *

Craig Singer lived in Arvada, a suburb on the western edge of Denver. As I drove, I found myself daydreaming, thinking about things I hadn’t thought of in years. It kind of shook me up, because they were things I really had no right thinking about. Things that wouldn’t do me any good at all. It shook me up bad enough that I had to pull over on the highway to collect my thoughts.

As I sat there trying to clear my head, a state trooper pulled up behind me. He walked over to my car, bent his head towards the window and sniffed, trying to detect alcohol.

“Everything okay in there?”

“Everything’s fine. I was just feeling a little woozy.”

“You haven’t been drinking, have you?”

I laughed. “Not yet, officer. But I could sure use one.”

“Why don’t you show me some identification?”

I handed him my driver’s license. He studied it slowly and handed it back to me. “I enjoy reading your column, Mr. Lane,” he said. “You okay now?”

“I think so, officer.” I had a sick feeling in my gut that told me I wasn’t.

**Bad Thoughts (Chapter 1)**


The fingers on his right hand—the ones that had been broken and mangled when he was thirteen—were being squeezed hard, forcing him to move through the cold and darkness. He tried to fight it, tried to see who it was behind him, but the grip on his fingers tightened, heightening the pain. He gave up and let himself be pushed forward.

He had no idea where he was. It was too dark to see anything. There was no sense of anything around him except that presence forcing his arm behind his back and squeezing his two fingers. He could smell a faint but oddly familiar odor, like formaldehyde and rotting garbage.

Up ahead was something white and small. As he got closer he could see it was a woman. He was about thirty yards from her, but he could tell she was beautiful, thin and slender with yellowish blond hair. But there was something wrong. Her mouth looked funny, bigger than it should’ve. As he was forced closer he could see she was naked and her hands and feet were bound. He could see pure terror shining in her eyes. A red piece of cloth had been stuffed in her mouth. Thin red lines crisscrossed her body.

Panic overtook him. He tried to fight whatever it was that was squeezing his fingers. He tried, but the pressure tightened and the pain became unbearable. And that smell . . . it was stronger now, gagging him, making his head reel. Whatever strength he had bled out of him.

A knife was lying on her naked belly. He was forced forward until his free hand was inches from it. The pain made him pick it up, made him place the point of the knife against her throat. The pain was trying to force him to stab her in the throat. There was an unspoken promise—push the knife a little further, just break the skin—only draw a drop of blood, and the pain will stop. He tried to fight it. He looked in her eyes. A muffled sound escaped from her as she tried to scream. He dropped the knife to the ground. A loud obscenity was barked out from behind him. The voice was vaguely familiar. Where did he know it from . . .

Then his fingers were twisted with a hard jerk, twisted to the point where they were about to break. The pain exploded inside him.
And then somehow he was free. Falling . . .

Bill Shannon awoke in bed. He was doubled over in pain, his two fingers throbbing, a cold sweat soaking his body. He grabbed his fingers and tried to massage them, tried to ebb the pain flowing from them. They were thicker than his other fingers and were a slightly bluish-purple color. It had been almost twenty years since they had been broken. They had been so badly damaged the doctors at first didn’t believe they could be saved. They were never quite right, though. Always stiff, always slightly purple in color, and at times, especially when it got cold and damp, they would throb like all hell.

The pain faded. He pulled himself up and leaned forward until his forehead rested in his hands. His skin felt cold, clammy. At least he didn’t wake up screaming, god, at least he could be thankful for that. ‘Cause if he had . . .

It was still a few minutes before the alarm was set to go off. Susie stirred next to him. He looked down and studied her. She was an exceptionally beautiful woman. Although the only blood in her was Irish, she had a dark, exotic Mediterranean look about her. Small and petite with long black hair that now lay across her oval face. As she slept, Shannon almost didn’t recognize her. She looked so calm and at peace, so much younger than her twenty-nine years. Even though they had been married for ten years, at that moment it seemed incredible to him that they knew each other.

Susie opened her eyes. As she recognized Shannon, and then as she focused on the perspiration dampening his skin, the color left her face.

“You’re having nightmares again,” she said hoarsely.

Shannon didn’t say anything.

“What was it about, Bill?”

“I don’t know,” he lied. “I really don’t. But I don’t think it’s anything to worry about.”

She rolled over and turned her back to him. “It’s early for you to be having nightmares. Three months early.

You told me you were making progress with your therapist, that this year was going to be different.”

“I really don’t think this is anything to worry about,” Shannon repeated weakly.

Susie lay quietly for a few moments. Then she got up and headed towards the bathroom. Before closing the door she turned to him and told him she hoped he was right. “I don’t think I can take it again this year,” she said.

She closed the door behind her. A minute later the shower was turned on. Shannon fell back onto the bed and listened to the soft drone of the water. Susie was right, it was too early for him to be having nightmares. February tenth was still three months away.

He closed his eyes and thought about his dream. Usually he couldn’t remember them. They’d be right at the edge of his subconscious, right where he could just about get a finger or two on them, and then they’d slip away. God, if this is what he dreamed about he could be thankful for that. This one, though . . .

He never saw that woman before. He knew that. She seemed so real, though. Shannon shivered thinking about her eyes, the pure, raw terror that flooded her blue eyes. And that smell. It was so damn familiar . . .

Neither of them had any appetite for breakfast. Shannon drank some instant coffee and then he drove Susie to the law office in South Boston where she worked as a legal secretary. During the ride she sat frozen, her small hands pressed together, her eyes rigid as they stared straight ahead. As she got out of the car she gave her husband an uneasy look.

“Bill,” she said, her face softening, “please tell your therapist about your nightmare. Promise?”

“Sure.” He tried to smile at her. “But I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. People have nightmares sometimes, right? It’s normal.”

As she stared at him the softness from around her eyes faded, leaving her face both drawn and tired. Without a word she turned from him and walked away, her movement as frigid as the November morning air. Shannon watched as she headed towards the building’s entrance. He struggled to keep his smile intact. For some reason he hoped she’d turn around, that she’d relent and give him a reassuring look, let him know there was nothing to worry about. He watched as she disappeared into the building, not once looking back at him. He couldn’t blame her. He knew in the pit of his stomach his nightmare was anything but normal.

But, as he told himself, February was still three months away. He could still beat it. Just block the damn thing out of his mind because nothing happened. Nothing but a crazy nightmare. His lips pressed into a tight smile as he pulled away from the curb. Twenty minutes later his jaw muscles ached as he drove into the back lot behind the Cambridge Central Square police station.

Captain Martin Brady was hanging by Shannon’s desk talking with a couple of the other detectives. As Shannon approached, Brady’s pale blue eyes took him in. “You’re looking a bit gaunt this morning,” Brady said, a
thin smile on his lips.

“I had some trouble sleeping last night.”
“Not ill or anything, I hope?”
“No. I just had a little insomnia.”

Brady’s pale eyes held steady on Shannon for a good twenty seconds before blinking. “Sometimes alcohol can interfere with your sleep. You haven’t been drinking, now, have you?”

“That’s good.” Brady inhaled, obviously trying to detect booze on his detective’s breath. Satisfied, he backed away. “Joe’s waiting for you in interrogation room B. He’s with a Kyle Rowley. Rowley’s wife, Janice, never made it home last night. Her car was found this morning in an industrial park off First Street. No sign of her.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Any reason to suspect him?”

“There is.” Brady showed his thin smile again, a smile that never made it anywhere near his eyes. “He came down to the station last night around seven to report his wife missing. Mind you, she was only an hour late at that point. Sounds like he might’ve been a bit too anxious to set up an alibi.”

Shannon nodded. “Yeah, it does sound that way.”

“I’d like to see this wrapped up quickly.” Brady hesitated as a queasy look pushed the smile from his lips. “An abduction is going to scare people here. If it’s the husband let’s get this finished with this morning before the media gets a whiff of it.”

“What about the car?”

“Forensics is going over it. Talk to the husband, okay, Bill?”

“Sure.”

“And, Bill, get it finished with this morning.”

Shannon gave his captain a nod and then headed off in the direction of the interrogation rooms. He stopped off at the lunch room to pour himself some coffee, and then stepped outside so he could smoke a cigarette. Cambridge had a smoking ban in the work place, and even though over half the cops in the precinct smoked, it was strictly enforced. Getting caught cost you a thirty-dollar fine, and he had already racked up a hundred and fifty in fines over the past three months. If Susie knew she’d be pissed, he thought with a slight smile. When he was done, when his nerves had for the most part settled, Shannon went to interrogation room B and stuck his head in.

Joe DiGrazia was leaning back in a chair, his eyes half closed, his hands folded on top of his thick belly. Sitting across from him was a man in his early thirties, tall, lean, with a sallow complexion and a day’s growth of stubble covering his face. The man, Kyle Rowley, looked like he hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before.

DiGrazia caught Shannon’s eye and gave him a signal that they needed to talk alone. He then turned to Rowley and told him he’d be right back. Rowley nodded dully in response.

Outside the interrogation room DiGrazia took a deep breath, expanding his chest half a foot. He was built like a bull, about five feet eight inches tall and practically the same width. A short, thick neck, not much hair, and a face like a granite block. He exhaled a lung full of air and made a face.

“I don’t know about this, partner,” he said. “I think the man’s genuine.”

“Why’d he report it so early?”

DiGrazia shrugged. “He was worried.”

“Tell me about him.”

“Not much. He’s a white-collar type, a software engineer, married four years. They have an apartment near Porter Square. And his wife’s missing. That’s about it . . .”

DiGrazia stopped, his eyes narrowing as he studied his partner. “Are you feeling okay?” he asked.

“I didn’t sleep well last night, Shannon said.

“You don’t look too good. Kind of nervous,” DiGrazia observed.

“I’m fine. Let’s go talk to the husband.”

They went back into the interrogation room and Shannon introduced himself to Rowley. Rowley seemed only partly aware of it, his eyes searching off into the distance.

“What time was your wife supposed to be home last night?”

“Six o’clock,” Rowley said, his eyes drifting towards Shannon but not quite making it. “Janice called me at five and told me she’d pick something up for dinner. She asked what I wanted and I told her to pick up whatever she was in the mood for. She told me she’d be home by six.”

“And after being only an hour late you thought something had happened to her?”

“I knew something had happened to her.” Rowley’s eyes met Shannon’s. They had a sickish, jaundiced look about them. “I don’t know how I knew, but I did. I came down here last night, but the officer at the front desk told me Janice had probably just stopped off somewhere for a couple of drinks.”
“Wasn’t that possible?”
“No.”
“Of course she has. There have been times when she’s been stuck at work, or she has a hair appointment that’s running late, but not like this. She called before leaving work that she was going to pick something up for dinner and be right home.”
“Where does she work?”
“In Watertown. She’s an accountant. Here’s her business card.” Kyle Rowley took a card from his wallet and handed it to Shannon.

The card had Janice Rowley’s work address and phone number. Shannon put it down in front of him and considered Kyle Rowley for a long moment.

“How have you and your wife been getting along?” Shannon asked at last.
Rowley tilted his head to the side, shaking it slightly. His lips pulled into a thin smile.
“I need to ask you this.”
“This isn’t anything like that,” Kyle Rowley said, his voice tired. “My wife and I love each other very much.”
“There haven’t been any problems, no fights or anything?”
“No.” Rowley’s eyes shifted upwards to lock in on Shannon’s.
“If we were to ask around we’d hear——”
“You’d hear the same thing. That me and my wife love each other. That’s all you’d hear about us.”

Shannon took a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, shook one loose, and looked at it for a long moment before pushing it back into place. He noticed DiGrazia staring at him from the corners of his thin, narrowed eyes.

“Could your wife be seeing someone else?” Shannon asked.
“No.”
(Is there the possibility—"
“Janice is not seeing anyone. There’s not even the possibility of it.”
“What about someone she works with?”
“I told you she’s not seeing anyone——”
“But you have suspicions, though.”
“What do you mean?”
“You had her business card ready for me. You obviously have suspicions about somebody there.”

Rowley thought it over. “I don’t think so,” he said. “You asked me where she worked. Anyway, I thought it could help to give it to you. Maybe somebody saw someone suspicious in the parking lot. Maybe somebody heard something. I don’t know. But that’s why I gave you her card. Janice is not seeing anyone.”
“How can you be so sure?”
“Because I know my wife,” Kyle Rowley said. “I know how we feel about each other.”

Something about Rowley being so cocksure of his wife bothered Shannon. Shit, half the cops he knew sooner or later found their wives in affairs. Stubbornly he kept at it. “If your wife is seeing someone I need to know about it——”

“She’s not seeing anyone. This is not anything like that.”
“What is this then?”

Pain pushed through the dullness in Kyle Rowley’s eyes. His entire face momentarily was flushed with it. “Janice was abducted,” he said. “Somebody took her. You realize that, don’t you?”

“Okay,” Shannon said, “let me be straight with you. What I realize is your wife is missing, either because she wants to be, because somebody did something to her, or because you did something to her. If we can rule you out then we can focus on the other two possibilities. Which means if your wife really was abducted, the quicker we can cross you off, the better the chance we’d have of finding her. Will you give us permission to search your apartment?”

“It’s not going to help at all——”
“I could get a warrant, but it would take time. I don’t think we want to waste time right now.”

Anger turned Rowley’s skin a soft purple. “This is ridiculous,” he started to argue, his jaw muscles hardening, “there’s nothing in my apartment that’s going to help you find my wife——”

“If you’re involved, you’re doing the right thing by stonewalling us,” Shannon said.
“I’m not trying to stonewall you,” Rowley said. “Goddamn it.” He shook his head. The color drained out of his face, leaving it the same unhealthy yellow it was before. “Do whatever you want as long as it gets you looking for Janice.”

“Are you willing to take a polygraph test?”
“I’ll take whatever you want me to take. Just find my wife.”

Shannon stood up. “I’m going to get you a pad of paper. I want you to write down any place your wife might have stopped off last night to pick up dinner. Any place you can think of. I want you to also write down anything unusual that might have happened over the last couple months, anything your wife might’ve said that seemed out of place—”

“Like what?”

“Like somebody coming on to her at work, or threatening her, anything like that. I also want you to write down everything you did from the time you left work yesterday to coming here this morning.” Shannon hesitated. “Do you have pictures of your wife?”

“I didn’t bring any. I can go home and get some.”

“That’s okay. Just give me your keys. While you’re writing down what I asked, Detective DiGrazia and I will search your apartment. I need to get a photo of your wife out on the wire. Do you give me permission to remove photos of her from your apartment?”

Kyle Rowley told Shannon to do whatever he needed to do and told him where they kept their photo albums. He took a pair of keys off a chain and handed them to Shannon. “Janice’s still alive,” he said. “I know it. I don’t know how I know it, but I do. Don’t let her die. She’s my life. I don’t think I can make it without her.”

“I’ll do everything I can. I promise. I’ll be right back with that pad.”

DiGrazia, before leaving, put a hand on Rowley’s shoulder and told him to hang in there.

Out in the hallway DiGrazia remarked how he let Shannon do all the talking.

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“I wanted to give you every opportunity to form an unbiased opinion.”

“Thanks.”

“You thought there was something funny about him pointing us towards her coworkers?”

“No. I just wanted to ask him about it.”

“So what do you think,” DiGrazia asked, “is he genuine?”

Shannon thought about it. “What I think is we’ve got a woman in pretty bad trouble.”

* * * * *

Before leaving the precinct they stopped to talk with Brady. Forensics took a couple of partial prints off the steering wheel, nothing else.

“Of course,” Brady went on, “they’re most likely the victim’s, but we’ll check them. Bill, tell me about the husband.”

“He’s given us permission to search his apartment and he’s also willing to take a polygraph. I’ve set it up for one this afternoon. Do you want to be there?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. Is he responsible?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

Shannon shook his head. “I don’t have a feel yet, Martin. I really don’t know.”

Brady gave DiGrazia a questioning look, but DiGrazia cut him off. “I don’t know what the fuck’s going on,” he said.

“You’re disappointing me,” Brady said to the two cops as they walked away from him.

Brady stood watching them, shaking his head, a dour look forming over his soft features. “And I’m not at all happy about it,” he said to no one in particular.

Julius Katz (first section)

We were at the dog track, Julius Katz and me. I had finished relaying to Julius the odds I calculated for the greyhounds running in the third race; odds that were calculated by building thousands of analytical models simulating each of the dogs’ previous races, then in a closed loop continuously adjusting the models until they accurately predicted the outcome of each of these races. After that, I factored in the current track and weather conditions, and had as precise a prediction as was mathematically possible. Julius stood silently mulling over what I had given him.

“Bobby’s Diva, Iza Champ and Moondoggie,” Julius murmured softly, repeating the names of the top three dogs I had projected to win.

“Eighty-two percent probability that that will be the order of the top three dogs,” I said.

“That high, huh? Interesting, Archie.”

Julius’s eyes narrowed as he gazed off into the distance, his facial muscles hardening to the point where he could’ve almost been mistaken for a marble sculpture. From past experience, I knew he was running his own
appropriately. One of these days he was going to have to start calling me Nero. But for the time being, I was Archie.

I was going to surprise Julius. It was just a matter of seeing enough cases to allow me to readjust my neuron network.

Nero Wolfe’s second banana who was always one step behind his boss. Yeah, I got the joke, but one of these days I was going to have to start calling me Nero. But for the time being, I was Archie.

Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald and Rex Stout. The name he gave me, Archie, was based on Archie Goodwin, some of the most important private eye novels of the twentieth century, including those of Dashiell Hammett, who founded the hard-boiled school of detective fiction.

He knew this and always got a good laugh out of it, telling me he had doomed that possibility by naming me Archie.

I wanted to prove to him that I could solve a case as well or better than he could. He knew this and always got a good laugh out of it, telling me he had doomed that possibility by naming me Archie.

I had my own ulterior motives for him taking a new case—it would give me a chance to adapt my deductive reasoning. One of these days I planned to solve a case before Julius did. You wouldn’t think a piece of advanced computer technology would feel competitive, but as I’ve often argued with Julius, there’s little difference between computer technology and a brain. So yes, I wanted to beat Julius, I wanted to prove to him that I could solve a case as well or better than he could. He knew this and always got a good laugh out of it, telling me he had doomed that possibility by naming me Archie.

My name wasn’t really “Archie”. During my time with Julius I’ve grown to think of myself as Archie, the same as I’ve grown to imagine myself as a five-foot tall heavyset man with thinning hair, but in reality I’m not five-foot tall, nor do I have the bulk that I imagine myself having, and I certainly don’t have any hair, thinning or otherwise. I also don’t have a name, only a serial identification number. Julius calls me Archie and for whatever reason it seems right; besides, it’s quicker to say than the eighty-four digit serial identification number that has been burnt into me. You’ve probably already guessed that I’m not human, and certainly not anything organic. What I am is a two-inch rectangular-shaped piece of space-aged computer technology that’s twenty-years more advanced than what’s currently considered theoretically possible—at least aside from whatever lab created me. How Julius acquired me, I have no clue. Whenever I’ve tried asking him, he jokes around, telling me he won me in a poker game. It could be true—I wouldn’t know since I have no memory of my time before Julius.

So that’s what I am, a two-inch rectangular mechanism weighing approximately one point two ounces. What’s packed inside my titanium shell includes visual and audio receptors as well as wireless communication components and a highly sophisticated neuron network that not only simulates intelligence, but learning and thinking which adapts in response to my experiences. Auditory and visual recognition are included in my packaging, which means I can both see and hear. As you’ve probably already guessed, I can also speak. When Julius and I are in public, I speak to him through a wireless receiver that he wears in his ear as if it were a hearing aid. When we’re alone in his office he usually plugs the unit into a speaker on his desk.

A man’s voice announced over the loudspeaker that bettors had two minutes to place their final bets for the third race. That brought Julius back to life, a vague smile drifting over his lips. He placed a five hundred dollar wager, picking Sally’s Pooch, Wonder Dog and Pugsly Ugsly to win the Trifecta—none of the dogs that I had predicted. The odds displayed on the betting board were eighty to one. I quickly calculated the probabilities using the analytical models I had devised earlier and came up with a mathematically zero percent chance of his bet winning. I told him that and he chuckled.

“What you’re doing is throwing away five hundred dollars,” I argued. Julius was in the midst of a losing streak and his last bank statement was far from healthy. In a way it was good because it meant he was going to have to seriously consider the three o’clock appointment that I had booked for him with a Miss Norma Brewer. As much as he hates it, working as a private investigator sharpens him and usually knocks him out of his dry gambling spells. I had my own ulterior motives for him taking a new case—it would give me a chance to adapt my deductive reasoning. One of these days I planned to solve a case before Julius did. You wouldn’t think a piece of advanced computer technology would feel competitive, but as I’ve often argued with Julius, there’s little difference between my simulated intelligence and what’s considered sentient. So yes, I wanted to beat Julius, I wanted to prove to him that I could solve a case as well or better than he could. He knew this and always got a good laugh out of it, telling me he had doomed that possibility by naming me Archie.

Of course, I’ve long figured out that joke. Julius patterned my personality and speech based on the works of one of the most important private eye novels of the twentieth century, including those of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald and Rex Stout. The name he gave me, Archie, was based on Archie Goodwin, Nero Wolfe’s second banana who was always one step behind his boss. Yeah, I got the joke, but one of these days I was going to have to start calling me Nero. But for the time being, I was Archie.
The reason I had an image of myself being five-foot tall was also easy to explain. Julius wore me as a tie clip, which put me at roughly a five-foot distance from the ground when he stood. I never quite figured out where my self-image of thinning hair and heavyset build came from, but guessed they were physical characteristics I picked up from the Continental Op. Or maybe for some reason I identified with Costanza from Seinfeld—one of the few television programs Julius indulged in.

The dogs were being led around the track and into their starting boxes. Julius sauntered over to get a better view of the track, seemingly unconcerned about his zero percent chance of winning his bet.

“You’re throwing away five hundred dollars,” I said again. “If your bank account was flush this wouldn’t be a problem, but you realize today you don’t have enough to cover next month’s expenses.”

His eyes narrowed as he studied the dogs. “I’m well aware of my financial situation,” he said.

“You haven’t had any wine since last night, so I know you’re not intoxicated,” I said. “The only thing I can figure out is some form of dementia. I’ll hack into John Hopkins research database and see if there’s any information that can help me better diagnose this—”

“Please, Archie,” he said, a slight annoyance edging into his voice. “The race is about to begin.”

The race began. The gates to the starting boxes opened and the dogs poured out of them. As they chased after the artificial rabbit, I watched in stunned silence. The three dogs Julius picked led the race from start to finish, placing in the precise order in which Julius had bet.

For a long moment—maybe for as long as thirty milliseconds, my neuron network froze. I realized afterwards that I had suffered from stunned amazement—a new emotional experience for me.

“T-That’s not possible,” I stammered, which was another first for me. “The odds were mathematically zero that you would win.”

“You realize you just stammered?”

“Yes, I know. How did you pick these dogs?”

He chuckled, very pleased with himself. “Archie, hunches sometimes defy explanation.”

“I don’t buy it,” I said.

His right eyebrow cocked. “No?”

He had moved to the cashier window to collect on his Trifecta bet. Forty thousand dollars before taxes, but even with what was left over after the state and federal authorities took their bites would leave his bank account flush enough to cover his next two month’s expenses which meant he was going to be blowing off his three o’clock appointment. I came up with an idea to keep that from happening, then focused on how he was able to win that bet.

“The odds shouldn’t have been eighty to one as was posted,” I said. “They should’ve been far higher.”

He exchanged his winning ticket for a check made out for the after-tax amount and placed it carefully into his wallet. He turned towards the track exit, and walked at a leisurely pace.

“Very good, Archie. I think you’ve figured it out. Why were the odds only eighty to one?”

I had already calculated the amount bet on the winning Trifecta ticket given the odds and the total amount bet on the race, but I wanted to know how many people made those bets so I hacked into the track’s computer system. “Four other bets were made for a total of six thousand dollars on the same Trifecta combination.”

“And why was that?”

I knew the answer from one of the Damon Runyan stories which was used to build my experience base. “The odds of anyone else picking that Trifecta bet given those dogs’ past history is one out of six point eight million. That four other people would be willing to bet that much money given an expected winnings of near zero dollars could only be explained by the race being fixed.”

“Bingo.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “If you knew which dogs were going to win, why didn’t you bet more money?”

“Two reasons. First, fixing a dog race is not an exact science. Things can go wrong. Second, if I bet more I would’ve upset the odds enough to where I could’ve tipped off the track authorities, and even worse, upset the good folks who set the fix up and were nice enough to invite me to participate.”

I digested that. With a twinkle showing in Julius’s right eye, he informed me that he was going to be spending the rest of the afternoon at the Belvedere Club sampling some of their fine cognacs, and that I should call his three o’clock appointment and cancel. A blond woman in her early thirties smiled at Julius, and he noticed and veered off in her direction, a grin growing over his own lips. Her physical characteristics closely matched those of the actress Heather Locklear, which would’ve told me she was very attractive even without Julius’s reaction to her. This was not good. If Julius blew off his three-o’clock, it could be a month or longer before I’d be able to talk him into taking another job, which would be a month or longer before I’d have a chance to adjust my deductive reasoning model—and what was becoming more important to me, a chance to trump Julius at solving a case.

“You might like to know I’ve located a case of Romaine Conti Burgundy at the Wine Cellar in Newburyport.
I need to place the order today to reserve it,” I said.
   That stopped Julius in his tracks.
   “1997?”
   “Yes sir. What should I do?”

He was stuck. He’d been looking for a case of that particular vintage for months, but the cost would mean he’d have to take a job to both pay for the wine and the upcoming monthly expenses, which meant he wouldn’t have time to get to know the Heather Locklear-look-alike. Julius made up his mind. With a sigh he told me that the Belvedere Club would have to wait, that we had a three o’clock appointment to keep. He showed the blond woman a sad, wistful smile, his look all but saying, “I’m sorry, but we’re talking about a ’97 Romaine Conti after all”, and with determination in his step headed towards the exit again. Once outside, he hailed a taxi and gave the driver the address to his Beacon Hill townhouse. I had known about the Romaine Conti for several days, but had held on to the information so I could use it at the appropriate time, one of the lessons I had learned from the Rex Stout books. Internally, I was smiling. At least that was the image I had of myself. A five-foot tall, balding, chunky man, who couldn’t keep from smiling if his life depended on it.

The Walk by Lee Goldberg (Chapter 1)

It wasn’t like he imagined it at all. Of course, everything Martin Slack imagined seemed to come from television or movies, or at least big chunks of it, so he figured his own imagination really wasn’t to blame for things not being the way they were supposed to be.

There weren’t any of those ominous, early warning signs that everyone ignored, like big flocks of birds flying away or dogs barking for no reason, or the little rumbles that were shrugged off as a big truck passing by on the street.

Marty wasn’t getting married, retiring from the force, embarking on a maiden voyage, or christening some bold, new construction project, each a definite precursor of disaster, at least according to Irwin Allen, the acknowledged expert on the subject.

And at least one thing turned out like the movies—here he was, underneath his car, just like Charlton Heston in Earthquake. That’s where any similarity between Marty and Charlton ended.

He wasn’t clutching Ava Gardner, and he certainly wouldn’t sacrifice himself to save her over Genevieve Bujold. And after the shaking was over, Charlton wasn’t curled in a fetal position, covered in dust and sprinkles of broken glass, wondering if the itchy wetness he felt on his legs was blood, something from the car, or his own piss.

Marty didn’t want to move. He felt just like he did waking up in his soaked sleeping bag at Camp Cochise, afraid to stir, hoping everything would dry before the other campers, especially that bully Dwayne Edwards, woke up and discovered he was a bed-wetter. The sharpness of the fear and shame, thirty years later, surprised him almost as much as thinking about it now.

It was enough to embarrass him into opening his eyes and pushing away the bricks and broken glass that surrounded the car. He dragged himself from under his Mercedes, scraping his fingers on the shards of glass in his haste. But he didn’t care. He had to get out.

The first thing he noticed was the dust, the chalky mist of pulverized plaster, mortar, and brick. It was everywhere. In his eyes, in his nose, in his lungs. Coughing, he staggered to his feet, his balance totally shot. It didn’t help that asphalt was all cracked and bubbled, like something was trying to break out from underneath.

The derelict warehouse he’d been in just a few minutes before, making the obligatory network exec visit to the set of Go to Heller, was now just a pile of bricks, which slopped onto his car, flattening it like a $42,000 German beer can.

The warehouse was never retrofitted for earthquake safety. It had been abandoned and neglected for decades, which made it a great seedy location for cop shows.

But it wasn’t abandoned today.

There were fifty or sixty people in there. The cast, the crew, the director. Now they were under tons of rubble. And if Marty had schmoozed ten seconds longer, he would have been, too.

Oh my God.

Marty stumbled over the debris, making his way around the edge of what had been the warehouse, and saw a handful of caterers, electricians, grips, and wardrobers swarming over the debris, quickly sorting through the bricks in a desperate search for survivors.

“Has anyone called for help?” he shouted, but didn’t wait for an answer. He was already yanking out his cell phone, flipping it open like Capt. Kirk’s communicator and dialing 911 as he approached them.

The tiny device bleated an electronic protest. No signal.

Shit!
What was the point of having a damn cell phone if you couldn’t depend on it at times like this?
Marty snapped the phone shut, stuffed it into his pocket, and joined the others, picking up bricks and tossing them behind him as fast as he could.

This was really bad. A native Californian, Marty’s ass was a natural Richter scale, accurate within two-tenths of a point. He knew the Northridge Quake was a 6.5 before CalTech did. And his ass was telling him this was bigger. Much bigger. Beyond the range of his experience.

“My brother,” someone shrieked.

It was the guy beside Marty, one of the grips, the people who do the heavy lifting around the set. The guy was missing an ear, blood soaking his Panavision t-shirt from his shoulder down to his tool belt. But the guy was oblivious to it, he just kept repeating the same thing as he thrashed his way through the debris.

“My brother is in there,” the guy said. “My brother is in there.”

The guy said it over and over, becoming more frantic with each repetition. Marty focused on digging through the rubble directly in front of him. He didn’t know what else to do.

Where the hell were the firemen? The police? Why wasn’t he hearing any sirens?

“Over here!” one of the caterers yelled.

Everyone scrambled across the rubble toward the caterer, helping him heave the bricks aside, exposing first a bloody pant-leg, then a big, silver belt buckle.

That was all Marty needed to see. They’d found Irving Steinberg, the executive producer, a New York-born Jew who dressed like he was about to go on a cattle drive. Irving liked to refer to his ever-present Stetson as his “ten-gallon yarmulke.”

In truth, Irving wore the Stetson because he thought it was less embarrassing and would draw less attention than even the most expensive toupee. Just look at Burt Reynolds and William Shatner, Irving would say. Wouldn’t they look much better with hats?

Irving always made Marty smile. In fact, Marty was walking out with one of those Irving-produced smiles just before the rumbling started.

“Put this show on the fall schedule,” Irving said, “and I can finally afford my dream.”

“What’s that?” Marty asked, willingly playing the straight man.

“My own ranch,” Irving replied. “Right in Bel Air. I’m gonna call it the Bar Mitzvah spread.”

They uncovered the rest of Irving.

If it wasn’t for the trademark clothes, he would have been unrecognizable.

Marty backed away, shaking his head, struggling not to lose his balance as he fled. Irving was dead. Just a few minutes ago Irving was talking and joking and dreaming and now he was dead.

How could that be?

That’s when someone jacked up the volume on the world. Suddenly Marty’s ears opened up and he was bombarded by a shrill chorus of horns and car alarms, punctuated by the muffled rumble and pop of explosions, volleys on a distant battlefield.

Marty looked up.

It was like the theatre lights coming on after a movie, when he would notice the walls, the aisles, and the moviegoers he had forgotten were there. Now the lights were coming up on Marty’s new world.

All the warehouses on the decaying, industrial block had either folded in on themselves in giant slabs or were reduced to rubble, all under a huge cloud of dust. The only structure still standing was a cardboard box mansion in the alley, its dirty-faced owner peeking out hesitantly at the destruction, then disappearing back inside, closing a flap behind him. His building was the only one on the block that seemed to be up to code.

Marty turned and saw the 6th Street bridge, the Art Deco giant slumped into the concrete banks of the LA river, pouring cars into the polluted dribble of water below. A big silver line of Metrolink rail cars had derailed, dangling over the vertical concrete embankment like decorative tinsel. Fire licked out of the windows, the flickering light shining off the dented, metal skin.

Marty turned again and saw the downtown LA skyline. Most of the glass towers still stood, like giant shattered mirrors, the harsh sun reflecting off their hideously cracked faces in jagged rays. They had swayed with the earth, as the engineers promised they would, shaking off their tinted glass skin. Only one high-rise couldn’t hold on, and now leaned against another, as if too tired to stand any longer, panting smoke and flame in enormous bursts.

Marty turned and turned and turned, trying to take it all in. He couldn’t. The enormity of the destruction was too much.

He felt an immediate distance, as if seeing it on a TV screen instead of living it. These were special effects, cardboard miniatures and plastic models. For a moment, he almost believed if he squinted, he could make out the matte lines between the real image and the computer-generated one painted in around it.
But he couldn’t.
All of a sudden the ground started to heave. At first Marty thought it was an aftershock; then he realized it was himself, his whole body shaking violently. He fell to his knees and started to gag, vomiting until he thought he’d start spitting out organs.

Finally, the gagging stopped and Marty just stayed there, his eyes closed, waiting for his body to stop shaking, puke in his throat, in his nose. He found the horrible smell and sick taste strangely reassuring. It was something he recognized.

Marty straightened up and found a Kleenex in his pocket. He blew his nose, balled up the tissue, and tossed it.

Now he knew why he didn’t hear sirens. Because no help was coming. Not for anyone. Not for a long time.

Time.

He’d left the warehouse set in a hurry, glancing at his watch as he rushed out, worried he’d be late for the staff meeting.

That was the last thing he did before it happened.

Now he looked at his watch again, a drop of blood landing on the cracked crystal just as he noted the time: 9:15 a.m. Tuesday.

* * * * *

7:00 a.m. Tuesday

The radio report that woke Marty up predicted another day of sweltering heat and unhealthful air quality. Everyone was urged to stay indoors and avoid breathing too much.

Ordinarily, that wouldn’t be a problem for him. He’d just go from the re-circulated air of his house to the re-circulated air of his car to the re-circulated air of his office with only seconds in between. But not today. He had to go downtown and make an appearance on the set.

Marty slapped the radio silent and didn’t bother to look on the other side of the bed. He knew she’d already fled downstairs to the safety of the morning paper. Beth was always gone when he awoke, no matter what time it was.

It wasn’t always that way.

They used to make love in the mornings, then lie tangled together, the sheets twisted around them, waiting for the radio alarm to go on and the chatty newscasters to drive them out of bed. Not any more.

He got up.

His house was above the smog, or at least he was high enough on the Calabasas hillside to enjoy the illusion that he was. From his bedroom window, he looked down onto the San Fernando Valley, at the thick, brown haze blanketing the flat urban sprawl. The layer of floating crud was trapped between the hills, which were slowly being devoured by tract homes like his. Only those homes cost about $300,000 less and were crammed onto a mere 6000-square-foot patch of dry graded dirt. They were stucco boxes for the Camry class.

Marty shifted his gaze to the red-tile roof of the Spanish colonial guard house and the morning progression of gardeners and pool cleaners and housekeepers climbing up the steep hill of his gated community in their over-loaded pick-ups and dented cars. He wondered if they knew they weren’t supposed to breathe today.

He trudged naked into the bathroom, and as he stood urinating into the toilet, reminded himself of all the things on his schedule. First, visit the set of Go to Heller, a supernatural pilot about a dead cop who rises from the grave and becomes a private eye.

Marty’s plan was to shake a few hands and pretend the network was wildly enthusiastic about the footage they were seeing, then rush back to the office for the weekly staff meeting where, as the guy in charge of current programming, he was responsible for the creative direction of the network’s shows.

Standards & Practices was in an uproar over the nipplage in the romantic adventure series Sam and Sally. Seeing erect nipples under clothing once in an hour was considered an acceptable accident. Twice was salacious. Three times was offensive content. They wanted Sally to start taping herself down. Marty was adamantly against it.

In the shower, under the hottest spray he could endure, he considered the various ways he could argue his point. He could try and shame them: Nipples are a fact of life. We all have them. What are we trying to hide here? It’s not like she’s running around topless. It was ludicrous to demand that an actress “restrain her aggressive nipples” so some tight-ass censor could pretend women didn’t have them.

Or he could take the artistic, pragmatic approach. More and more viewers are fleeing the artificially chaste world of network television for the more realistic programming on pay-cable, where nudity, sex, and profanity are commonplace. If they are going to successfully compete, they have to be less puritanical in their thinking.

Or he could try the truth. The only reason anybody watched Sam and Sally was to see Sally’s nipples. And if she taped them down, they might as well cancel the show.

As Marty slipped into his beige pants, white shirt, and navy blue dark jacket, he decided to go with the truth, if
only to see that standards prick Adam Horsting turn pale.

He headed for the stairs, pausing for a moment to look in the kid’s room. They didn’t have a kid, but they had the room. For some reason, he just couldn’t pass the open door without looking in. Stuffed animals with permanent, vacant stares looked at him between the slats of the empty crib. We’re waiting.

Marty went back and closed the door, but he knew it would be open by the time he got home. He hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen with an enthusiasm he didn’t feel.

Beth was sitting at the kitchen table in her bathrobe, leaning over the LA Times and a cup of coffee, her bare feet entwined in the fur of their sleeping dog, Max. The fat golden retriever delighted in being her ottoman. It was one of two things Max was good at. The other was the ability to pick the most expensive shoes Marty owned to chew on. Max obviously liked the taste of Italian leather.

His wife had short blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a band of freckles across her nose that made her look like a mischievous child. People thought she was cute, and she hated that. She was certain it meant that no one took her seriously.

“Good morning,” He said, sticking his head in the pantry, looking for something he could eat on the run.

“They found a shark with a mouth that glows in the dark,” she said. “It got caught in a fisherman’s net. They think it’s some unknown species that lives in the deepest, darkest part of the ocean.”

“Uh-huh.” He peered into an open box of Cinnamon Pop Tarts. There was one foil package left inside. That would hold him until he could swipe some fruit off the craft services table on the set.

“They think the shark swims with his mouth open. The light attracts the fish and they swim right down his throat,” she flipped through the pages, scanning the headlines. “They think there could be lots of species down there we’ve never seen.”

“Sounds like there could be a series in that.” He stuck the foil pack in his pocket and went to the refrigerator, where he snagged a can of Coke, absentmindedly knocking something on the floor. “Though the last successful underwater show was thirty years ago.”

“The whole world doesn’t revolve around television.” Beth said, followed by one of her dismissive sighs.

“Most people wouldn’t know what they wanted to eat, what they wanted to wear, or who they wanted to fuck if the TV didn’t tell them,” he bent down to pick up whatever he dropped. “So as vice president of current drama, I obviously play a vital role in our society.”

Marty smiled to let her know he was joking, or at least being delightfully self-deprecating.

“You dropped something,” she motioned to the floor with a slight nod of her head.

It was a tiny vial. He picked it up. Pergonal. It had expired months ago. He was about to throw it out when he saw her staring at him. So instead Marty hastily put the vial back in the refrigerator and slammed the door, as if the vial might fight its way out again. The last thing he wanted to do was resurrect The Discussion.

When Marty turned around, he was relieved to see she was reading her paper again. He popped the top on the Coke and took a big gulp, studying her over the top of the can as he swallowed. She was especially lovely in the morning, hair tussled, face still flushed with the warmth of sleep.

Beth seemed to sense his eyes on her and the affection behind them. “Are you going to be late tonight?” she asked softly.

“I should be back before primetime.” That used to make her smile, a hundred repetitions ago.

And then, as if reading his thoughts, she gave him a small smile and returned to her paper.

** * * * *

9:16 a.m. Tuesday

Marty sat on his Richter scale, picking bloody bits of glass out of his hair as he wondered what the hell he should do.

It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. He wasn’t supposed to be here.

In all his earthquake scenarios, he was always at home, where he was fully prepared. Everything in the house was bolted, strapped, or stuck down. There was bag under the bed bulging with survivalist stuff?bought in a binge after the last quake. There was even a sack of food for the dog. And on the slim chance the house was decimated, they had camping gear in the garage for emergency shelter.

At least he knew that Beth was safe.

If the house didn’t collapse on her.

There was nothing to worry about, he told himself. They had a thorough geological survey done when they bought the house. The report said it was earthquake safe and built on solid bedrock.

Yeah, and the house inspector said the drainage was great and what happened the first time it really rained? Water flooded the yard, seeped under the French doors, and ruined the hardwood floors. Remember?
He had to go home.

But how?

He was stuck in downtown LA, a decaying urban wilderness, thirty miles from the safety of his gated community in Calabasas, his Mercedes crushed. And even if it wasn’t, the roads and freeways were going to be all but impassable for any vehicle.

He’d have to walk.

No easy feat for a guy who’s idea of a long walk was from the couch to the TV set, but he could do it. He had no choice, unless he wanted to stay here. And he knew what happened to guys like him who took a wrong turn and ended up in the ‘hood alone, looking white, rich, and privileged, armed with only a spring-loaded Mercedes key-fob.

His heart started to race. He thought he might begin gagging again. He took a deep breath and willed himself to focus.

Marty looked back at his E-class. The trunk, defiantly shiny and unscratched, pinched out from under the rubble. He hurried over to the car, popped open the trunk, and rooted around the piles of scripts and videos until he found an old LA street map. Then he grabbed his gym bag, which was wedged into the furthest corner. It had been six months since he used the bag, back when he was caught up in the early enthusiasm of a new year’s resolution and a two-year gym membership. He went twice and never went back.

Inside the gym bag were a pair of old Reeboks, a t-shirt, some sweats, and a bottle of water. He shoved the tire iron, a flashlight, and the Mercedes first-aid kit into the bag.

It was a start.

As he kicked off his stiff dress shoes and put on the Reeboks, he started thinking about what else he’d need for his journey. Packaged food, lots of water, duct tape, matches, dust masks, some rope. Basically, he had to make a mini-version of his home survival kit.

No problem. He could find most of those things right here, between the catering wagon, wardrobe trailer, and the grip, prop, and lighting trucks. Film crews had everything.

All he needed now was a plan of action.

Marty figured there was maybe nine hours of summer daylight left. If he started walking now, even as out of shape as he was, he could easily be in the valley and heading down Ventura Boulevard by nightfall.

That was okay.

He certainly had nothing to fear in the valley, where Tarzan and Universal Studios had entire communities named after them and the oldest historical landmark was the Casa De Cadillac dealership.

All he had to figure out now was the best way to get there.

It was possible to live your entire life in Los Angeles and never see the bad parts of town, except in a seventy-mile-per-hour blur on the freeway or channel-flipping past the evening news on the way to a Cheers rerun.

Even so, Marty knew where those dangerous neighborhoods were, and he was well aware that to get home, he’d have to walk through some of them. There was no way around it.

But he tried to make himself feel better by looking at the bright side. He’d be walking in broad daylight, in the midst of chaos, and would only be in truly bad places for a few miles. There were far worse parts of the city he could be stuck in. At least he wasn’t visiting Compton, or South Central, when the quake hit.

He slammed the trunk shut and spread the yellowed, torn street map out on top of it. Calabasas was on the south-western edge of the San Fernando Valley, on the other side of the Santa Monica Mountains and the Hollywood Hills.

There were two major freeways into the valley, the 101 over the Cahuenga Pass just five or ten miles north of downtown, or the 405 through the Sepulveda Pass, a good fifteen miles or twenty miles west. Between the two passes, there were three major canyon roads that snaked over the Hollywood Hills.

The other option was to head due west to the beaches of Santa Monica and then follow the Pacific Coast Highway north to one of the canyon roads that cut through the Santa Monica Mountains. But that meant crossing the entire LA basin, which was the last thing Marty wanted to do.

He decided the quickest, safest way home was the way he’d come, taking the 101, better known as the Hollywood Freeway, northwest over the Cahuenga Pass into the valley.

That was assuming there were no major obstacles in his path. Which, of course, there would be. Toppled buildings, buckled roads, crumpled freeways.

But that wasn’t what worried him.

It was the thousands of little obstacles. The people. The injured and the dead underneath it all. The earthquake’s human debris.

Then there were the derelicts and gang-bangers, who he hoped would be too busy looting to pay attention to one man walking home.
He wouldn’t look at anyone. He’d just hurry along. Gone before anyone noticed him.

Just keep walking. Across the city, over the hills, and along the valley, never stopping until he got to his front

door, where his wife would be waiting, alive and well.

Simple. From point A to point B.

Not too complicated. No reason he couldn’t do it. There were guys who walked across entire states in the

frontier days. Or at least they did in the western novels his flunkies read and summarized for him.

Marty zipped up the bag and headed for the trucks and trailers to assemble his kit.

He was going home.

Dead And Gone by Harry Shannon

PROLOGUE

Dry Wells, Nevada

1968

Folks were scared of Wayne Lee Garrett. Nobody could quite remember how long he’d been around, maybe

five years and change. People said he was an outsider, a “flatterd,” come from a gaming town in the low desert.

He’d been drafted, sent to Viet Nam for a couple of tours, went wrong in the head like a lot of the other boys.

Anyhow, Garrett had moved way up into the hills to get away from the world, kill his own food and just be alone.

That’s what folks said.

Wayne Lee was a big man, sunburned and sweaty, inclined to wear overalls and muddy work boots. He

scowled a lot, always crinkled up his eyes, but it wasn’t from laughing. Had a pair of thick eyebrows looked like

beetles about to mix it up. Later on, trying to say something nice about him, young Reverend Grass allowed as to

how Garrett was always in church come Sunday, mumbling to himself, following right along with Biblical passages

like a man who’d done some studying, lots of praying, maybe even some preaching of his own.

Now, along about 1966, a local spinster named Mary got herself in a family way. That kind of thing was

considered shameful back then, not at all like it is today. About thirty seconds before the baby dropped, old Wayne

Lee up and offered to make her an honest woman. Mary, figuring it was better than being mocked for the rest of her

life, agreed to get hitched. Young Reverend Grass did the honors.

Wayne Lee took her high into the mountains to live with him. He delivered her baby with his own two hands.

Garrett had bought this land for pennies on the dollar, and probably didn’t think to ask why. He probably should

have. But by the time Mary arrived, he’d already built an old redwood cabin and an outhouse, run electricity to it;

tapped a well to get some fresh water in the kitchen. Hell, even bought a used black and white television. It wasn’t

much of a life, but it must have been decent, because the two of them popped out another kid right away.

Whatever happened that awful night had to have started a ways back. Wayne Lee Garrett and his family

didn’t mingle much, mostly kept to themselves. They came down the 41 to buy groceries now and again, rode into

town in an old Chevy that farted black smoke, Garrett looking neither left nor right, but did their business and left.

He brought his family to church, but the never stayed for cookies and punch, not even once.

At first Mary, she was a bit different. Now and again she’d bring the children down in that Chevy -- couldn’t

hardly see her tiny face behind the steering wheel -- and treat them to a cherry ice cream cone. She’d try to talk to

folks, smiling and all, and most men would be polite, but a lot of the women didn’t care for her because of her past.

They’d do that strange thing women do, where they are really nice in ways that cut you down at the same time.

Mary’s smile would stay frozen in place when they walked away laughing, but a sorrowful hurt crouched

behind her eyes. She’d cringe like a whipped puppy. And after a time, she stopped coming to town at all.

Meanwhile, Wayne Lee continued to attend church services, but all that last summer and fall he’d be there alone.

Just sitting in the back row, rocking and whispering.

The devil’s breath was on the town late that fall, meaning the kind of bitter wind comes scratching at the

window like a living thing, whips down the fireplace and turns your house ice cold. Now, here’s the thing. A tribe of

Native Americans once lived high up in these same mountains. Legend has it they were called the Horse Humans.

It’s said their elders believed that wind was the shrieking of an evil spirit called Orunde, a demon that drives men

mad. Listening to that wind howling outside, it wasn’t a stretch to think they might have known what they were

talking about.

And Wayne Lee Garrett’s little redwood cabin? It was built right on top of the damned Indian graveyard. See, that’s why the land went so cheap in the first place.

The night it all went down, Wayne Lee Garrett stood in the living room of his small cabin listening to a plastic 45 spinning on his record player. It was a Nashville outlaw tune called “Forty Years of Pain.” That song was a big hit back then, sung by some young country star or another.

“He was a man,” went the lyrics, “who loved as hard as he drank. Lord, she was trouble. You can take that to

the bank…”
Wayne Lee Garret sighed. He turned and stared at his wife. Mary Garrett stared back. Wayne Lee whispered, “My sweetheart.”

The record continued. “She broke his heart, took another man’s name, and he died alone…after forty years of pain.”

“Our favorite tune, precious,” Garrett said, softly. “Our very own little baby making song.” Mary squirmed a bit in her chair, made an odd little whimpering sound through the dish rag jammed in her mouth. Garrett moved closer, stroked her skin. “I have to do this, Mary. You brought it on yourself by lying with another man.” She shook her head feverishly. Her mind raced, no no no I haven’t done anything I don’t know what you’re talking about please don’t no…

Mary struggled against her bonds, watched with wide eyes as Garrett finished loading the Smith & Wesson 38. He produced a gentle smile. “I’m sorry, but it’s out of my hands.”

Mary tried to scream through her gag. Garrett lurched closer, whispered in her ear. “Hush. Hush, now. You don’t want them to wake up for it, do you? I’ll make this as quick as I can. I promise.”

Torn, Mary struggled to contain herself as her demented husband walked heavily into the other room. A small girl’s sleepy voice. “Daddy?”

BAM! And Mary shrieked and fought and BAM the second shot killed her other child. Wild with grief and terror, Mary sagged in the chair and wept. A third shot as Wayne Lee finished one of them off, and his footsteps slowly trudged back into the front room. The record player continued, and a jaunty guitar solo made this slaughter by lantern light seem all the more macabre. “Forty years of pain…”

Oh, God, my poor babies, Mary thought in anguish. And her body trembled I am next, dear heaven he means to kill me, too.

Wayne Lee put the gun against her stomach. Mary struggled in the chair, almost fell backward. He steadied her arm. Looked down with compassionate eyes. “It’s time.” Terrified and broken hearted, Mary closed her eyes. At the last moment, Garrett found it in his heart to spare her more agony. He moved the barrel and placed it over her heart instead. A muffled shot, a spray of blood against the kitchen sink and Mary was gone.

And he died alone, after forty years of pain…

The song ended. The record player scratched and complained but failed to reset itself. Garrett walked to a kitchen chair, scraped it backwards. Sat down heavily, listening to the noise from the machine.

A small, wry smile crossed his face. “Forty years of pain,” he whispered, and stuck the 38 in his mouth. Nearly vomited but took a deep, deep breath and squeezed the trigger. This time he succeeded. The gun went off, and so did the back of his head. BOOM. Grey and red matter splattered the record player and raced up the back wall. Meanwhile, the song echoed through the woods, carried on the wind, forty years of pain...

A constable found the family a few weeks later, from the stench of four darkened bodies, all fly-bloated and rotting. In fact, the smell was so damned ripe the place stayed empty for years. And naturally it began to get something of a reputation. “Go up there, you don’t see nothing,” the people said. “But you know what? You only think you’re alone.”

That’s what they whispered to their children, too, and those kids told the generation after that. Until finally it was just the one sentence, gave the whole story about that old Indian graveyard and the Garrett cabin.

“You only think you’re alone.”

ONE

The moving guy was a perpetual college student named Aaron, one of those laconic surfer dudes who never seemed more than ten minutes from a bong hit. He carried boxes in and out with brisk efficiency, sometimes using a metal dolly but often just his own gloved hands. The hardest part was the medical equipment, but stuff that was electrical had been carefully marked with numbered tape, which helped a lot. Somehow they’d managed to reassemble everything. It was finally time to go. Aaron stopped, leaned on the gate to close it. He grabbed his clipboard then took a long look around. Damn, he thought. Why the hell would anyone sane want to live way up here?

The screen door squealed. Aaron looked up, squinted into the afternoon sun. His client cameout of the ancient
redwood cabin, stood on the porch and slammed the screen door. Dust rose from the splintered wood and settled again, like a wide cloud of insects too lazy to leave.

“Blood hell,” Jack Wade said with a good-natured grin, “what a piece of shit!”

The handsome young Englishman wore carefully torn jeans and a faded tee shirt that had probably set him back three hundred dollars at some shop in Beverly Hills. Aaron thought the guy looked like some movie star dressing down, or maybe a porn star dressing up. Jack glanced around the empty clearing, shrugged his muscular shoulders. “Still, I have to admit that it is kind of pretty up here.”

“You don’t say.” Aaron took in the dilapidated redwood cabin made of splintering boards, the lonely clearing, the dense, piney woods and the foul outhouse. “Way to look on the bright side. Me, I prefer a little human company now and then.”

“Well, it is unquestionably a pig sty, but at least I don’t have to worry about keeping up with the neighbors.”

“Good point. You all set up in there?”

“Almost.” Jack Wade stretched and forced a chuckle. “Can you believe it? That icebox has to be fifty years old, but it still works. Even the television pops on once in a while, before it goes off again. Must be some lose wires. And catch this. The owner put a drain in the kitchen floor, probably because the walls leak when it rains.”

“A drain in the floor? Charming.”

“Anyway, I put the food away and just used my cell to order groceries from some place called the Dry Wells market. I had to leave a message, so God only knows what’s going to show up.”

“Don’t worry, they have to grow something fresh around here besides crystal meth,” Aaron said. “And at least you’ve got one hell of a wine collection.”

“That we do. My spouse is quite the epicurean gourmet.”

“Sorry, dude. I didn’t bring my dictionary.” Aaron finished totaling up the charges, motioned for the new owner to come closer.

Jack didn’t notice at first. Aaron waved a second time. Jack jogged over with the studied insouciance of a natural athlete. “Okay, straight up,” Aaron said, conspiratorially, “tell me you didn’t pay good money for this.”

“No,” Jack said. He flashed a killer smile. “To be honest, I won it in a card game.” He looked down at the clipboard. “That’s everything, right?”

Aaron nodded. “All I need you to do is sign.”

Jack examined the paperwork. He frowned. “What’s with the overcharges?”

“Had to pack it up in the middle of the night, bro. That’s extra.”

Jack scowled. Something unsettling flashed in his eyes. “What, you guys do one swing shift and we have to pay six hundred bucks?”

Aaron looked down and away. “Hey, that’s also for being awake all night, and driving it all the way up here.” He lowered his voice further. “Now, you want to pay me in cash, I’ll do you a solid.”

Aaron looked up hopefully. Jack’s face said he didn’t understand. Aaron cleared his throat. “For cash,” he whispered, “it’ll be like we never met.”

Jack got it. He nodded and reached for his wallet. “Hang on.”

The screen door banged again. A middle-aged brunette in hospital whites emerged from the cabin and walked briskly towards the moving van. “Mr. Wade,” Nurse Clark called, “your wife is in the bedroom. I did her makeup and combed out her hair.” The nurse had a reedy, emery board of a voice that seemed constantly tense. Not for the first time, Jack Wade wondered if the bun in her hair was half as tight as her ass. Still, he paused, managed to turn on the charm as the dour nurse moved closer. “Sure you can’t stay for a day or two, just until we get settled in?”

“I hate to be crass about this, but you’re two weeks behind already.”

“I understand, Nurse Clark, I was a medical student back in England, remember?”

She held her ground. “Well, then you should understand more than most.”

“I’m sorry to let you go, but the insurance money is gone, and we can’t afford to continue on our own.”

“Mr. Wade, I have problems of my own.”

Aaron didn’t care for drama. He sighed theatrically and rapped his fingers on the side of the moving van. “Look, Mr. Wade. Sorry for your troubles, but can we move this along? I haven’t got all day.”

Jack counted out a number of hundred dollar bills. He handed them to the driver. “Here, and it’s like you just said, yeah?”

The nurse fixed on the money, an eagle after a field mouse. “Okay, and while we’re on that subject, pay me. I’m not exactly running a charity here.”

“Of course,” Jack said. He produced a checkbook, began to scribble. Somewhat mollified, Nurse Clark watched until she was certain every dollar was written down properly. “Naturally, I’d love to stay, but I need to get back to town to catch that bus. My damned car is still in the shop from the fender bender I had last week.” She tried
to get a look at the remaining balance in his checking account but failed.

Jack ripped the check out, handed it to her with a romantic flourish. “Here, paid in full. And thanks.”

“Oh,” the nurse suddenly purred, “I hate to think of you and your wife up here all alone day after day, why the very idea makes me sad, so of course, if more money becomes available?”

“Sure.” Jack patted her arm. “My cell works up here. We’ll call you.”

“Please do.” Nurse Clark folded the check neatly, held on tight. “Fucking insurance companies are robbing us all blind.”

The driver headed for the cab. “Look lady,” Aaron said, “you want a ride, get in the van.”

Nurse Clark hurried toward the passenger door, clutching the check in her right hand. “Yes, well. Goodbye.”

The moving van backed around the tree stump sitting in the middle of the yard. Aaron made a wide turn to avoid the small porch, and turned back towards the road leading down to Highway 41 and the dying little town of Dry Wells. He rolled down the driver side window as he passed Jack Wade. Aaron winked. They knocked knuckles. “Hang in there, Mr. Wade.”

“I’ll try.”

“And don’t worry, dude. It’s like we never met.”

Jack nodded, backed away towards the tree stump as they drove away. His stomach sank. Jack nearly called out for the driver to wait, but he couldn’t think of a reasonable excuse.

The moving van accelerated over the bumpy turf, went up the steep slope and vanished into the dry pines. Jack Wade returned to the porch, sat on the steps listening. The engine disturbed the mountains for a few moments longer, but then faded away to be replaced by the urgent rapping of woodpeckers, the eerie giggle of a nearby stream and a low, sad wind moving through the trees. The barren quiet soon overwhelmed Jack. This place seemed as isolated as the surface of Mars.

In fact, he’d never felt so alone in his life.

Jack sighed, called out loud. “Well, it’s just you and me now, Frankie. Living it up like a couple of major rednecks.”

###

#### About the author:

Dave Zeltserman is the Shamus-award winning author of *Julius Katz*. His third novel, *Small Crimes*, was named by National Public Radio as one of the 5 best crime and mystery novels of 2008. His novel, *Pariah*, was named by the Washington Post as one of the best books of 2009. His upcoming novel, *Outsourced*, is currently in development by Impact Pictures and Constantin Film.

#### Connect with Me Online:

My website: [http://www.davezeltserman.com](http://www.davezeltserman.com)

My blog: [http://smallcrimes-novel.blogspot.com](http://smallcrimes-novel.blogspot.com)

#### Advanced Praise for Outsourced

'A small gem of crime fiction' Booklist

'A dark, lightening-paced read’ Financial Times

‘Bodies mount up as the double dealing and revenge gather apace. The blurb on the book describes it as a
"fast-paced, edge-of-your-seat crime novel,” and it really does live up to the hype. Add this to your holiday reading
list for a piece of escapism.’ Morning Star

‘Back in the “real” world, Dave Zeltserman’s Outsourced is a dryly witty take on the heist caper genre with a
gaggle of reluctantly redundant software engineers planning the perfect bank robbery. He brings together crazed
hitmen, Russian mafiosi, Iraqi antiquites smugglers and domestic angst in a fast-paced action romp that has the
inestimable advantage (or not) that its characters are actually human.’ Peter Millar, London Times

‘DAVE Zeltserman is one of the new, highly original voices in crime fiction, his writing spare, disciplined
and concrete. His plots are as original as anyone writing hard-boiled fiction with an attractive noir edge, and always
grimly entertaining. Like his characters. Outsourced, already being turned into a movie, follows an all-too-human
bunch of outsourced software engineers who have no job prospects and no long-term insurance but do possess a
plan. They are going to use their computing skills to rob a bank, and Zeltserman delivers a finely paced, witty and
stylish take on the heist caper novel. More than most authors churning out mysteries, Zeltserman is fully steeped in
the conventions of crime fiction. He remains absolutely his own hard man.’ The Australian

**Praise for The Caretaker of Lorne Field**

"Superb mix of humor and horror" Publishers Weekly, starred review

“superbly crafted horror story” Booklist

“delicious horror-ish novel” Newsday

“The Caretaker of Lorne Field is a wonderfully weird, gritty, and pitch-dark legend, perfect for New England.
Weaved in the compulsively readable narrative is a heavy dose of our current society's meanness, unease, and ambiguity: kind of a nightmare-noir zeitgeist. The thing of it is, the reader is never safe in Dave Zeltserman's hands. I love that. You should too.” Paul Tremblay

**Praise for Small Crimes:**

"There's a new name to add to the pantheon of the sons and daughters of Cain: Dave Zeltserman." NPR's Top 5 Crime and Mystery Novels of 2008

"Zeltserman's breakthrough third crime novel deserves comparison with the best of James Ellroy", Publisher's Weekly, starred review

"A Jim Thompson mentality on a Norman Rockwell setting... 'Small Crimes' is a strong piece of work, lean and spare, but muscular where a noir novel should be, with a strong central character whom we alternately admire and despise." Boston Globe

**Praise for Pariah:**

"A doozy of a doom-laden crime story that not only makes merry with the justice system but also satirizes the publishing industry" Washington Post, Best Books of 2009

“Sheer astounding writing” Ken Bruen

"PARIAH is sure to catapult Zeltserman head and shoulders above other Boston authors. This is not only a great crime book, but a gripping read that will crossover to allow greater exposure for this rising talent." Bruce Grossman, Bookgasm

**Praise for Killer:**

"Spare prose and assured pacing place this above most other contemporary noirs." Publisher's Weekly

"With graphic imagery and exciting twists, this novel is impossible to put down and has a surprising ending. A brilliant read" Aberdeen Press & Journal

"This novel is everything hard-boiled fiction should be - compact, direct and disciplined, and concerned with humans rather than stereotypes. It is also, for all its violent subject matter, a quietly told story, which makes its tension all the more intense” Mat Coward, Morning Star