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BENJAMIN JONES WOULD LIKE TO THANK:

My beautiful wife Tina, my wonderful daughters Kennedy and Sherill, my mother Cynthia, my big homie Del and each and every family member and friend that has shown love during this great ride. To Tiffanie Minnis – Writer's Movement is in full effect! Also, big shout out to author Benjamin Rogers, writer of FAITH & THE UNDEAD, I appreciate all your help, support & guidance!

Prologue

Santa Catalina Island, twenty-two miles south-southwest of Los Angeles. The place that some considered a paradise – visited by more than a million visitors each year – was now a paradise lost; it was as if the island had fallen asleep and had never woken up from the nightmares that continued to plague it. The smell of the ocean was damned near non-existent now as it was drowned out by the aroma of death and despair that showered the island like the most acidic of rain.

What used to be a population of thirty seven hundred residents had been reduced to a little more than two hundred, the majority of which were not native to the island – they had been transported here against their will. Those that were physically able, roughly eighty of them, congregated on the beach, tattered underclothes clinging to their sunken in frames as they washed what little bit of clothes they had in the cold water of the Pacific Ocean. The darkest circles surrounded their eyes, eyes that had lost the little flicker of hope that they once contained; that flame had been extinguished a while ago with no signs of ever returning. Most had made peace with the fact that they had ceased living and now simply existed, if that's what you would call what they were being forced to do.

Things were not supposed to be this way. How did they let them win? Buildings were eternally dark from the absence of electricity that had been shut off long ago. Decay was widespread with trash piled up everywhere and houses falling apart from neglect. Weeds and grass penetrated the cracks in the sidewalk and streets while trash barrels were kept ignited for warmth and to cook food. This was not humanity. There had to be some kind of resistance still going. Good is always supposed to defeat evil.

As they went on about their mundane tasks, trying to keep their mind occupied, all heads turned toward the sound of a ferry, the *M/S Black Magic*, as it approached the island. This wasn't good. Watching with tense eyes and stiffened bodies, all of them having been through this before and all knowing that there were only two reasons why it would be coming – it was either going to be a drop off or, God forbid, a pickup.

The stern of the ferry stopped just short of the beach and a ramp began to slowly descend, splashing down into the water and digging into the sand. The door to the hull opened and an all too familiar site greeted those on the beach. The darkened cargo hold consisted of close to two hundred people, all shading their eyes from the glaring rays of the sun as it flooded in and temporarily blinded them. The whirring mechanical sound of the back wall extending outward could be heard as it forced those in the cargo hold to exit, their feet sloshing through the water and landing on the smoky-grey colored quartz that made up the sand. They were a varied crew – a mixture of young and old; black, white, Mexican, and everything in between; short and tall; some with physical injuries with others only being mentally injured by what they've gone through – but they all shared the same shell-shocked look on their faces.

The last set of feet exited the ferry at which point the ramp and the wall were retracted. The hull closed and the ferry drifted back out into the ocean, leaving it's cargo behind until they were needed. Some on the beach rushed down to embrace and help the new arrivals, taking them by the hand and leading them up the shore to their new homes or, as they referred to this place, their prison.

Setting foot on this strange new place a young boy that was clutching his mother's hand took a long look back at the ferry as it grew smaller in the distance, studying it

before turning to see his mother's face and the heavy tears that ran down her dirt streaked cheeks. "What's wrong mama?"

"Nothing sweetheart," she told him as she wiped her eyes. "Try to keep up, alright? We have to try and find ourselves a place to sleep before all the good spots are taken."

"What about dad? Is he coming on the next boat?"

She gazed down at him with a sad expression on her troubled and tired face. If he would've been a bit older then he would have been able to read between her tears and know that his father wasn't coming on the next boat or any boat for that matter. She knelt down to where she was face to dirty face with him. "I'm sure he'll be here soon but, until he gets here, you're going to need to be strong, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good." She kissed him on the cheek. "That's my big man. Let's go."

Chapter 1

Nineteen years earlier.

The stadium was rocking, awash in the purple and white colors of Hollis high school. The crowd was anxious and standing on their feet, clapping their hands together on this perfect fall evening, trying to rally and inspire their hometown team.

Kneeling in the middle of the huddle, surrounded by ten of his teammates, was Travis Baxter. “Alright guys, this is it,” he told them, his voice confident as he spoke, sounding like the established leader that he was, being sure to make eye contact with each of them as he spoke. He wasn’t the type to get overly excited and yell; he had mastered the art of getting his point across calmly. “We’ve only got time for one play so let’s make it happen. We’ve gotta leave everything that we have on the field so that we can walk out of here tonight with our heads held high.”

He glanced over to his left at one of his wide receivers, a lanky black kid named Shawn. “Their safety has been playing you soft all game so I’m going to be looking for you. Whatever you do make sure you end up in the end zone, alright?”

“I got you,” Shawn assured him, nodding his head up and down. “You get the ball in the air and I’ll come down with it.”

Confident in Shawn and his ability to make the big play Travis directed his attention to the rest of his teammates. “Derek, you and the rest of the line are going to have to buy me some time to get the ball to Shawn. If they decide to blitz then you’re going to have to pick it up.”

“Don’t worry about that,” answered Derek, the big beefy anchor of the offensive line. “You worry about throwing the ball and we’ll take care of everything else.”

“Alright, let’s give the fans something to cheer about.” He held his right hand out which was soon joined by ten other hands that landed on top of his. “Hollis on three. One, two, three...”

“HOLLIS!” they shouted out in unison.

The huddle broke and they took their position in front of the waiting defense. The game clock showed a measly four seconds left in a 20-15 game. Travis glanced up at the clock and then into the stands, taking notice of all the fans that were nervously waiting for him to make a play. Returning his focus back on the game his eyes scanned the defense that was setup, trying to gauge what they were going to hit him with. “Red Dynamite Twenty-five, Red Dynamite Twenty-five!!” he barked out as he positioned his hands underneath the center to receive the ball. He quickly lifted his right foot a few inches off the ground and then placed it back down. The tight end on his right side caught the signal and then hustled over to Travis’ left side. “Hike!!!!”

The ball passed from the center into Travis’ hands and he immediately dropped back three steps, everything now moving in slow motion for him as he surveyed the field, his arm in position to let the ball fly as soon as the opportunity presented itself. His head swiveled from left to right, seeing that one of the defensive lineman had found a seam through the offensive line and was about to bust through. The lineman performed a flawless spin move against his defender and was suddenly free and bearing down upon Travis like a runaway freight train.

Things started to speed up for Travis in a hurry as he quickly looked downfield, watching as Shawn began to create some separation down the sideline between himself and the safety that was covering him. Travis’ arm flew forward and the ball was

propelled down the field right before the defensive lineman struck, wrapping Travis up and slamming him down to the ground; every last bit of air being ejected from his lungs and being replaced by pain.

Lying flat on his back, breathing heavily through his mouth and looking up at the sky with stars in his eyes as the lineman rolled off of him, Travis didn't get a chance to see the tight spiral of the ball as it hit Shawn perfectly in stride and was carried into the end zone for six points and the win. He also couldn't see the crowd jumping up and down, hugging each other in manic celebration, but he could hear them, their joy letting him know that he had succeeded. Next thing he knew he was being hoisted off the turf and mobbed by his teammates, coaches and even the cheerleaders. The euphoria he experienced was enough to make him temporarily forget about the throbbing pain in his chest and ribs. He pumped his fists in the air and relished the moment.*

Her voice was strained and well seasoned, reminding Travis of his grandmother. "Just a minute!!" He could hear the shuffling of her feet as she slowly made her way to the front door. The sound of three separate locks being turned was followed by the door swinging open.

"You must be Travis," stated Ms. Bonner as she opened the screen door. She was a tiny and fragile looking woman with thick glasses and an aroma of baby powder that drifted off of her. Though it was well past noon she was still in her nightgown and a light blue pair of fuzzy slippers adorned her feet.

He flashed her a magnificent smile. "Yes ma'am, I'm Travis."

"Come on in."

He stepped into the darkened house, thinking to himself that it was not a house but more like a museum dedicated to a life long past. Dusty pictures of a much younger Ms. Bonner with family and friends hung on the walls between fake plants – real cobwebs woven through the leaves – that sucked what little bit of light that there was right out of the house. “I appreciate you for taking the time to meet with me.”

“It’s my pleasure. I don’t get much company these days besides the mailman so I jump at any chance I get to talk to someone, especially kids.” She led him into the living room where a large floor model television was showing a Black & White film; the television proved to be a perfect mirror of Ms. Bonner and her life – fifty years past its glory days and collecting dust. A black foldable chair was setup in front of the couch and it was that seat which she directed him to. “Is this seat going to be okay?”

“It will do just fine,” he told her as he sat down.

“Would you like something to snack on or something to drink? I just made a pitcher of tea if you would like a glass.”

“No thank you, I’m fine at the moment.”

“Okay, well let me know if you change your mind.” She sat down on the couch, studying him as he took his backpack off of his shoulder and rummaged through it. “You look awfully familiar to me; where have I seen you before?” She squinted her eyes to try and get a better look at him.

Travis glanced over at her. “To my knowledge we’ve never met so I don’t know. Well, actually...,”

“Oh, I remember now,” she interrupted him, “I’ve seen you in the newspaper. You’re that quarterback that everyone is talking about; I knew that your name sounded

familiar. They keep saying that you're going to lead us to another state championship this year. You were even on the news Friday night. That was a great throw that you made at the end of the game."

He smiled, trying not to appear too happy at the recognition. "Yeah, that's me. It's a little too early to be thinking about a state championship but if we keep playing at the level we're playing at then we'll have as good a shot at the title as any other team."

"Don't be modest – if you're good then you're good, that's all there is to it."

"Well, between you and me, we are pretty darn good." He winked at her which caused her to slap her knee and laugh out loud. Seeing her laugh brought an even bigger smile to his face. "Are you okay with me using this?" he asked once she got her laughter under control, pulling a small tape recorder from his backpack. "I've found that it works better for me than trying to write down everything that people say."

"That's fine."

He started the recorder and then set it down in front of her on the coffee table that rested between the two of them. Five bottles of prescription pills and a plethora of various periodicals littered the table. "Alright Ms. Bonner, what can you tell me about the great hurricane of 1900 that struck the city of Galveston, Texas?"

"My grandfather, a man by the name of Theodore Longfellow, was nineteen during that time and, together with his father and sister, resided in Galveston. My great-grandfather had managed to accumulate a significant amount of money in the cotton industry which afforded them the opportunity to live in the Strand District of Galveston which is what you would call an affluent part of the city."

"What about your great-grandmother; where was she?"

“She had died a few years earlier while giving birth to my grandfather’s sister – I guess she would be considered my great-aunt – whose name was Sally.”

“Okay. What did your grandfather tell you about the hurricane?”

She began to slowly rock back and forth on the couch, her eyes closing for a moment. “The day before it happened no one was really sure that the hurricane would even strike Galveston’s shore and, even if it did, the powers that be reassured the citizens that we wouldn’t end up like the residents of Indianola which had been a port city in Texas that had been completely decimated by a hurricane a short time earlier. The world now knows just how wrong they were.

“The morning of the hurricane was, by all accounts, a beautiful one, but conditions began to deteriorate as the day went on. My grandfather was in the process of heading up the stairs to the second floor of the home, he being in the middle between his father and sister, when a huge wave of water crashed through one of the downstairs windows, instantly washing Sally and my great-grandfather away while my grandfather clung for dear life on the banister.”

Travis sat up in his seat, intrigued by her words. “What happened to them?”

“They were simply gone; their bodies were never recovered. He theorized that they were buried somewhere beneath the sand on the beach. My grandfather spent the rest of that night holed up in one of the upstairs closets on the second floor, listening to the howling of the wind and the rising water, praying to God that he would make it through the night.

“The next day he and the rest of the survivors ventured outside to survey the damage and were shocked by what they saw. So many homes had been destroyed and a mountain

of debris faced the ocean but those things were nothing compared to all of the bodies. The sheer number of corpses was mindboggling and the smell blanketed the city like a thick fog and could be smelled for miles. My grandfather was one of the many that dug through the debris searching for survivors but it very quickly turned from one of rescue to a recovery mission. The screams of the people trapped under the wreckage haunted him from that day forward. Rescuers were unable to get to all of them and, as time passed, their cries for help began to diminish as those that were trapped eventually perished. There were too many corpses to try and bury so they tried throwing them out to sea instead but the currents from the gulf washed them all back to shore. What they decided to do to solve the problem was to setup funeral pyres and burn the bodies as they found them, a process that lasted for weeks after the storm.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine what that must have been like. What was your grandfather’s mind like after that? How did he cope with all that he had seen and all that had happened to him and his family?”

“As could be expected it was real tough for him, to say the least, because he pretty much lost everything that he loved and cared about that day. He ended up going to live with his uncle in Colorado before eventually moving out and starting his life over with a family of his own. My father always used to comment about how distant my grandfather would get at times and the occasional far off look in his eyes. He never went near the ocean or any large body of water again because it brought back too many bad memories for him. He frequently had dreams where he was attempting to rescue people that were trapped underwater but they would always slip out of his reach. He turned to alcohol to cope with it all and that eventually became the death of him.”

“My condolences about your grandfather and the rest of your family that lost their lives during that time.” He reached over and stopped the tape recorder. “I think that I’ve heard enough; thank you for sharing your amazing story with me.”

“You’re quite welcome. I have something for you if I can remember exactly what I did with it.” She moved a few of the magazines around until she found what she was looking for, a small manila envelope which she picked up and then handed to Travis. “Here are some pictures that my grandfather took. All they’re doing is collecting dust over here; maybe they’ll be of some use to you.”

He took the envelope and placed it and the tape recorder into his backpack. “Thank you again, Ms. Bonner.”

*

Travis closed the front door and then used the deadbolt to secure it. Traveling from the living room into the kitchen he glanced over to find his mother asleep on the couch. Not wanting to disturb her he quietly slipped into the kitchen where he grabbed an apple from the basket of fruit on the table and, with apple in hand, made his way from the kitchen into the hallway, entering his room which was the first one on the right.

His room was typical of that of a teenage jock. Posters of Brett Favre – his favorite player – coated the walls along with the occasional photo of Megan Fox or some other hot girl of the moment that served to break up the monotony of all that was Favre. A small desk with a laptop computer on it sat to the right of the window while a bookcase rested on the left, overflowing with trophies and ribbons of all sizes that covered up the few actual books that were there.

He flicked the light on and took a seat at the desk, his prized varsity letterman jacket hanging from the back of the chair. He placed the apple in his mouth while he unzipped the backpack and removed the tape recorder and envelope from it, setting them down next to the laptop. The backpack was tossed to the floor as he took a bite of the apple, the remains of which he set down on the desk. Opening the envelope he retrieved a stack of fifteen Black & White pictures that were in pretty decent shape considering that they were over a hundred years old. Besides a few tears around the corners and a little yellowing they were all good.

“Back already?”

Travis turned to find his mother standing in the doorway and rubbing sleep from her eyes. “Hey. I got in a few minutes ago. You looked peaceful as you slept so I didn’t bother waking you.”

She walked up and stood next to him, placing her arm around him. “How did your meeting go with Ms. Bonner? Was she any help?”

“Oh yeah. She told me all about her grandfather who survived the hurricane and all that her family went through during and afterwards; it was some pretty powerful stuff. She also gave me some pictures that he had taken of the aftermath which I was about to go through.”

“That was nice of her. Be sure to take care of them in case she needs them back. You need to get a good grade on this project so that we can get your GPA up and impress all of the colleges that have been scouting you. Though we’re banking on a scholarship it doesn’t hurt to get those grades as high as possible in case something falls through.”

“I know, mom; you’ve been preaching that to me for the last four years.”

“I just want the best for you. Oh, I picked you up some ice cream.”

“Good. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She ruffled his hair. “I’ll leave you be.”

“Okay. I’ll be out in a few.”

She walked out of the room and he turned his attention to the pictures. The first was of a house that had been flipped over onto its left side, sitting at an impossible angle. All the windows were busted out and the front door was missing, displaying the inside of the house which was filled with sand, water-logged furniture and misery. He gingerly set the picture down and then analyzed the second one. In it were two men wading through the waist deep water of a completely submerged street, a dead cow floating ahead of them like some kind of hillbilly floatation device. The next picture was of a neighborhood that looked like a bomb had gone off in it, leaving nothing but destruction where life used to be. The following picture was that of one of the funeral pyres that Ms. Bonner had spoken of. A pile of corpses were being burned while a group of men were tossing more of them onto the flames like firewood.

He held the picture up and took a closer look at it, staring intently at one of the two men that were standing off to the side watching the flames consume the bodies while wiping his brow with a handkerchief. “No way.”

He opened his laptop and pulled the internet up. The Google homepage popped up and he typed the words *Vice President McDonnell* into the search engine, watching as a list of images and articles materialized before his eyes. He clicked on the first one in the list and a picture of the Vice President appeared on his screen. He held the Galveston picture up next to it – the resemblance was more than uncanny, it was spot on.

Chapter 2

The lights slowly went up in the studio and Timothy Columbus looked straight into the camera, a shit eating grin on his smug little face. He was sitting on a huge story this time – possibly the biggest story that he would ever have – and he couldn't wait to let it loose.

“Welcome to *Political Hot Stove*, hosted by yours truly, Timothy Columbus. To all my faithful viewers on television and through our website, as well as those listening via radio, we have a special treat for you today.

“Unless you've been living under a rock for the past few days you have all seen and heard the reports involving the Vice President of the United States. A single picture posted on a Myspace page has caused a media frenzy and we have been fortunate enough to get an exclusive interview with the teen that posted the now infamous photo. So, without further ado, allow me to extend a warm *Political Hot Stove* welcome to our guest this week, Mr. Travis Baxter.”

There was a generous amount of applause from the studio audience as the camera pulled back to show Travis sitting to the left of Timothy in a dark colored suit that was a little too big for him. A nervous smile was on his face and he looked very uncomfortable in front of the eye of the unblinking camera. “Hi Mr. Columbus, thanks for having me.”

“No, thank you for accepting our invitation and, please, call me Tim. I'm going to trim all the fat and get right down to the meat of the matter and ask the question that the whole world is dying to know: how did you come into possession of this now famous, or infamous depending on how you look at it, picture?”

“I kinda happened upon it by accident. While researching a project for my history class I was given a set of pictures and that picture happened to be one of them.”

“Would you be willing to give us the name of the source that provided you with the picture?”

“I would rather not. The three days since I’ve posted the picture have been nothing but hell for me and I know that my source would not want any of the attention that it would ultimately bring; I know that I didn’t.”

“Fair enough but let me ask you this then, Travis – if not for the attention then what then was your motivation for posting the picture?”

“It was all innocent. My purpose was to simply point out the similarities between the Vice President and the man in the picture. I have a few friends that are real heavy into politics so I figured that the picture would get viewed a few times by them, maybe have a few comments posted, and that would be the extent of it. I certainly wasn’t expecting all of this.”“Over the years I’ve done a countless number of interviews and I’ve never seen someone so nervous on this show. You’re clearly not comfortable with all of this attention are you?”

“No, I’m not comfortable at all. I’m not used to people camped out in front of my house, taking pictures and begging for interviews. All I want to do is play football and be left alone.”

“Have you had a chance to sit back and really digest what all the uproar is about?”

“Not really because it’s all been happening so fast. I’ve never been one to follow politics so this is all foreign to me. I would rather be spending time playing football

rather than watching or listening to some politician, no offense to those that follow politics.”

“Maybe I can help you understand what all the fuss is about and why this picture, and now you, is so important. You see Travis, a wall of secrecy has shrouded the Vice President ever since then Senator Clark picked him as a running mate for the presidency of the United States. He was like a ghost – no one knew anything about him. He had never held any kind of political office before; no one even knew who he was until Senator Clark’s speech announcing him as his running mate. People wondered why a very likeable Senator would select an unknown to serve as his Vice President. What was the agenda? I mean, this guy was nowhere on the map. All kinds of people, myself included, tried to find out something – ANYTHING! – on him but we were stonewalled at every turn and it only got worse after he became Vice President. It was like there was something about him that the government was trying to protect and, so far, you have been the only person that has been able to come up with anything on him. Doesn’t that seem a little strange to you?”

Travis shook his head, wishing that he were anywhere in the world right now and wondering why he had ever agreed to do this interview in the first place. “Well, yes, when you put it that way but who’s to say that the man in the picture is even the Vice President? That picture was taken way back in 1900; that would make him, at the minimum, 130 years old and that’s not possible.”

“That is always the first instinct, to believe that what we see with our own eyes somehow can’t be true, regardless of how solid the evidence is to the contrary, so what we do is try to find ways to make it seem untrue due to it not fitting into what society and

our perceived reality deems to be real. To counter that what we did here at *Political Hot Stove* was, using the most advanced and sophisticated facial recognition software available, compared the facial features of the man in the picture to a recent picture of the Vice President and it came back 99.99989% conclusive that the two men are one and the same. We then presented our findings to the White House but their only comment on the matter was to tell us that they had no comment. There is something that stinks to high Heaven about this and the people have the right to know what it is, especially when it involves the leaders of this country.”

A fresh round of enthusiastic applause went up inside the studio. Tim took a sip from his mug and then once again stared into the camera as it pulled in closer on him, removing Travis from the shot. “There is an old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. Ladies and gentleman our mouths should be overflowing with words right now. Our government, the very people that we elected to power, is deceiving us. They are holding back the truth, whatever that may be, in the hope that we will sit still and be quiet. I encourage you to not be still and silent like statues but instead to rise up and let your voice be heard! Talk to your friends and family – go on Twitter, Facebook, Myspace and whatever else you can find to spread the word. We have to let our government know that we are not sheep and that they can no longer pull the wool over our eyes.”

The camera gradually pulled back as he turned to face Travis. “Travis, it may not seem like it now but I believe that in time you will be viewed as a key figure in this piece of history that we are currently living in. Fate has selected you to be a symbol of the common man in a struggle to be heard; David can triumph Goliath.” He stood up and extended his hand to Travis who rose to shake it. “Thank you for joining us today.”

“You’re welcome; thanks for having me.”

Tim turned and faced the camera again. “Don’t go anywhere, folks. We’ll be back with more *Political Hot Stove* on the other side of this commercial break. We’ll be discussing the latest information on the missing daughter of Tina Macintosh, CEO of Global Defense Industries and one of the most powerful women in the world. Stay tuned!”

*

His piercing blue eyes stared out the window of the abandoned warehouse, focused on the Secret Service agent assigned to protect him that was standing watch by the door three stories below. “This morning I woke up, kissed my wife and then headed over to my office, same as I do most everyday, except this time one of my assistants handed me a copy of the latest edition of *The National Query*. I looked at it to find my picture splashed across the front page with a headline asking if there was a monster in the White House. Needless to say, I wasn’t happy.”

He rubbed his left hand over his bald and wrinkled head as he slowly turned away from the window and faced the other person in the room, a tall muscular gentleman of Eastern European descent that looked none too pleased to be here. “This is starting to get out of hand,” continued the Vice President. “That parasite Columbus and the rest of his kind are like dogs salivating over a steak. The media attention that this picture is generating has the potential to cause a lot of unnecessary problems and I can’t have this getting more out of control to where it damages the bright future that we have ahead of us. I need you and your group to silence Columbus once and for all. I’ve obtained a copy

of his upcoming travel itinerary and he will be flying into Los Angeles in a few days. Do what you have to do no matter how you have to do it, just make sure that he's dead."

"What about the boy?"

"I want him dead, too, but only after he gives up his source. For all we know there could be more pictures out there."

"And what if won't talk?"

"Then kill everyone in the god damn town! Hollis is not that big so whoever he talked to must be in it somewhere."

"Won't that lead to more questions if the two main people responsible for all of this controversy are killed? They will be looked at as martyrs."

"It's a risk we're going to have to take. I can understand your concern but something has to be done." He turned and stared out of the grime coated window again. "It's better to cut the head off of the snake now before it has a chance to lay eggs. I know how you think Malachi so I know that the irony is not lost on you that I'm able to so easily order the killing of humans in order to create an easier path to co-existence with them. We are at the dawn of a new day, one that requires us to abandon our old rules and step out of the box in order to usher in a new way of thinking and doing."

"I disagree," Malachi answered back sharply, his voice deep and heavy with years of pent up rage and frustration. "You talk about them as if they are our equals when we both know that they are not. My question to you is why do you continue to treat them as such?"

"They're a means to an end. I know that may be hard for you to understand considering what happened to your sister."

“Mention her again and I will tear you apart.”

The threat from Malachi forced McDonnell to slowly turn around, his demeanor one of fear. “Of course – I was wrong, my apologies.” An unsettling smile emerged on his face. “Listen, I’ve studied the human race for close to six hundred years,” he replied, speaking in a very deliberate tone, wanting to be absolutely certain that his words were coming across with the intended weight and tone that he wanted to convey. “Both their cultures and ours have much to gain from the other and we have long since evolved to where we no longer need them for our survival. The world is on the cusp of major changes and we must adapt to those coming changes accordingly. Whether you choose to admit it or not you know these things just as well as I do.”

Malachi did in fact know these things but that didn’t mean that he had to like or accept them. “We have adapted enough!!!” he growled. “We are losing our identity; our heritage is being compromised and we are forgetting what it is that we are. You and the rest of your cronies have already recommended that we wear contacts to conceal our eyes and makeup to darken our skin when we are out in public – what’s next? You say that we need to learn to adapt but your logic is backwards – the strong never adapt to the weak; it’s always the other way around. We are the undisputed kings of the food chain! We should be running this miserable planet but instead you want us to live amongst these weak creatures that are no better than the rats and roaches that occupy the very building we’re standing in. At least the rats and roaches know their place in this world.”

“Let us not forget that we were human once.”

“That time has passed. Pretty soon their time, as well as yours if you don’t change, will pass as well.”

McDonnell glared at Malachi. “What did you just say to me?”

“You heard what I said,” he answered back, refusing to back down. “Change or die with them.”

“I would encourage you to carefully think about your words before you speak them. Don’t forget who you’re talking to.”

“I would encourage you to remember what you are.”

McDonnell started to speak but thought better of it as the fear he had of Malachi got in the way. He cleared his throat. “You have a lot to learn about how the world operates. Let me know when Columbus and the boy have been taken care of.” He walked past Malachi and exited the room.

Malachi stepped over to the window and watched as McDonnell emerged from the building. The Secret Service agent opened the car door for him and then closed it after McDonnell was in. As the car pulled off McDonnell looked up at Malachi and then rolled his eyes.

Chapter 3

Pacing back and forth in the hallway, glancing over five index cards that were crammed full of notes, she was anxious. If you didn't know her you would think that she was nervous or maybe even scared but if you really thought that then you knew absolutely nothing about her.

A young man in a dark suit appeared from around the corner. "They're ready for you, Ms. Macintosh."

She stopped pacing and looked over at him. "Thank you, Steven." She took a deep breath and then exhaled. "Okay, I'm ready," she said as she handed the index cards over to him

. "Yes ma'am."

He escorted her down the hallway to a large ball room that was overflowing with press. Flashbulbs went off like fireworks as she stepped up to the podium and adjusted the height of the microphones. She stood for a moment, giving the camera flashes a chance to die down.

"Good morning everyone. There are not many people in the world that don't know me but, for those that don't, my name is Tina Macintosh. Some of you know me through the company I run, Global Defense Industries, or by the recent *Forbes* article ranking me as the richest woman in the United States. I am very proud of both of those things but those things are nowhere near the most important thing to me. Before I was any of those things I was a mother and that, unfortunately, is why I'm standing in front of you right now."

She motioned up to two large screens, one on each side of her, where a picture of her daughter appeared, looking every bit like her mother with a striking set of sapphire blue eyes that were almost hypnotic to look into. “My daughter Jessica has been missing for three days now. She is the latest in a string of missing individuals – sons, daughters, mothers, wives, husbands, and fathers – that have been happening lately, all of which are still out there waiting to be rescued. Jessica was last seen walking out of her off campus apartment at which point she up and vanished off the face of the earth.”

The screen on the left remained on Jessica while the one on the right began showing a slideshow of the other missing individuals. “My daughter is no different than the rest of those that are missing and I am no better than the friends and families of those that continue to look for them. Having more money doesn’t make the pain any less or the grief more manageable; heartache doesn’t care about what tax bracket you’re in or where you go on vacation each year. What my money can do that some of the other families can’t is provide me with a bit more resources than most which I plan to use to the fullest of my extent, starting with a \$1,000,000 reward for any information that leads us to find Jessica or any of the individuals that you witness behind me.

“I’m speaking directly to whoever has my daughter right now. Jessica is the only thing that I have in this world. I will use every resource available to me to get her back. It’s not too late to let her go and do the right thing! If she is hurt, even if it is so much as a broken nail, God himself will not be able to protect you from my wrath. Give my Jessica back.”

Chapter 4

It was a little before sunset and the air was alive with the sounds of games being played on the Midway and rides being enjoyed, all mixed in with the laughter of the young and the young at heart. Each year the county fair has a certain way of bringing everyone out of their shells and making them forget, if only for a few hours, about their mounting bills, the stresses of work, family issues, their dwindling 401(k) accounts, etc..., etc... that kills your spirit each and every day.

Everyone was having a great time – young children were getting their faces painted while the older kids rode rides that were secretly more dangerous than they could have ever imagined them to be. Even the adults reverted back to being children by testing their luck and skill. Spurred on by the incessant badgering of the young men and women operating the games they excitedly flipped plastic frogs onto floating lily pads or shot streams of water into the mouths of mechanical clowns to expand balloons that would eventually pop. Some threw softballs in an aggressive and egotistical attempt to knock down stacks of silver, and weighed down, milk bottles in the hopes of winning a worthless prize that they would have already forgotten about by the time they made the short drive back home. The aroma circulating through the air was sickeningly sweet with cotton candy being spun, funnel cakes being fried, and popcorn being popped; the smell settled into people's clothes and took root inside of their pores. Life was good.

Five year old Billy Stevenson sat upon his father's lap, his face sticky from the bag of light blue cotton candy that he was in the process of devouring. "Dad, look at the birds!" he shouted, pointing his blue tinged finger up at the seven dark figures in the distance that flew closely together in a tight V-formation. "They're huge!"

His father, a big burly man with a beard that made him resemble a lumberjack, followed Billy's finger up to the sky where he, too, caught sight of the figures in the sky. He closed and then reopened his eyes, following that up with a quick shake of his head, not believing what his eyes were clearly showing him – it had to be a mistake. His eyes closed and opened again, proving to him that it wasn't a mistake at all as the same sight greeted him. The figures looked awfully human and appeared to be in a slow descent, their heads scanning the fair grounds as if looking for someone. "I don't think that those are birds, son." He lifted Billy off of his knee and held him close to his chest as he rose to his feet.

Billy continued to yell with enthusiasm as what he believed to be birds advanced towards them. It didn't take long before Billy attracted the attention of people around him, causing them to gaze up at the sky along with him. Interest spread like wildfire and the Midway was soon deserted as people made their way to the center of the fairground to get a better view, gesturing upwards and discussing what they were seeing with their neighbors. Faces were focused and intense, awestruck and full of fear at the same time. Children clutched their parent's hands, wives inched closer to their husbands and girlfriends scurried to find their boyfriends as it became clear that the figures in the sky were indeed human and that both comforted and scared them all the same.

"I had no idea that they were going to be hiring a team of skydivers this year," spoke an anonymous male voice in the crowd. "This is awesome."

A wave of relief washed over the crowd and a collective sigh escaped their lips. Of course they were skydivers, what else could they be?!?! Children loosened their grips and wives went back to mingling and gossiping. Boyfriends and husbands were able to relax

and no longer had to be on guard for trouble; a few of them even looked irritated at all the fuss that had been made over nothing.

As the figures got closer it became evident that the group consisted of four women and three men. There were other features that were beginning to take shape about them as well. Their eyes were completely silver, reflecting like small mirrors, and their fingernails were abnormally long and sharp like the talons of an eagle. Most troubling was the fact that there were no jet packs or parachutes to aid their flight – they did it all on their own.

Travis stepped up, his girlfriend Beth at his side, and peered up at the sky. “Something’s wrong. Everybody run – NOW!”

Travis’ words drew everyone’s attention back to the sky and this time they all had the same exact reaction – pure and unadulterated fear. They listened and they ran, scattering like roaches. The figures picked up speed to where their descent now sounded like high pitched screams being unleashed straight from the bowels of Hell. Smiles widened on their faces, exposing five inch long fangs and snake-like tongues that flickered from their mouths. Descending from the sky like missiles they struck their targets with laser guided precision, working from the outside in as they picked off their prey.

A young kid named Jimmy Tibble and his girlfriend Sue were one of the first to feel their wrath. Sue was holding his hand and trying to keep up with him as they both ran as hard as their legs would allow them to go. The two of them caught the attention of one of the females named Sherona that had a long and lean frame with a head full of scarlet hair that blew wildly in the wind. Maintaining an altitude of twenty feet above them she

already knew that their young hearts were powerful; she could hear the blood flowing through their veins harder and faster in a direct correlation to their increasing fear. Saliva dripped from her mouth as she anticipated the taste of their flesh – like that of a fine piece of filet mignon. She locked in on Jimmy and then glided down on top of his back with a surprising heaviness about her that wasn't indicative of her petite frame, the force of which caused both Jimmy and Sue to hit the ground.

Dazed, Sue struggled to make it to her feet. The right side of her head was throbbing as she brought her hand up and winced as it made contact, feeling not only pain from the gash but also the wetness and warmth from the blood that was streaming down her face. She glanced over to see Sherona rip Jimmy's head from his neck with a powerful grip from her claws.

Sue let out a terrified scream, one that was lost amidst all of the other screams around her. Gathering up her strength she got to her feet and began running, making her way towards the stretch of trees to her north and trying not to look at all the carnage that surrounded her on every side. Bodies and limbs were everywhere and the ground could no longer soak up the amount of blood that was being spilled. Anguished voices were being quickly extinguished as throats were grabbed and, in most cases, torn out completely.

Sue closed her eyes and put her head down, no longer able to stomach what she was seeing as she continued towards the trees. Suddenly she felt the ground shake in front of her. Opening her eyes she was instantly overwhelmed by the sight of Malachi, his clothing soaked in blood, holding the lifeless body of the little boy that was making all of the commotion earlier in one of his gigantic hands. She couldn't move or stop from

watching, seeing Billy's head gripped in Malachi's other hand, his eyes and mouth frozen open in one last moment of terror. Malachi lifted Billy's body above his head and then opened his mouth wide, his split tongue lapping at the blood that drained from Billy's neck into his waiting mouth. Once the last drop touched his lips he tossed the boy's body and head aside like trash and then rocketed over to another unfortunate victim that was instantly ravaged.

Attempting to shake the image from her mind Sue looked straight ahead, realizing that she was now only five more steps away from the cover that she hoped the trees would provide. Her body would not stop trembling as she ran, each step feeling like ten. Her breathing was heavy and she felt each beat of her heart rattle in her chest as she progressed. Three more steps she thought. Two...

Her eyes widened from an intense shot of pain as one of the males called Grimble flew down from behind and grabbed her by the ponytail. His powerful hands pulled her backwards, causing her neck to snap and her jaws to clinch together so tightly that the teeth in her mouth shattered from the impact. Her yell for help was silenced before it had the chance to be heard. Grimble and one of his partners, a female named Angoria, began to messily feed upon her, each of them ripping through a side of her neck. Blood from her punctured artery sprayed up in the air like a mighty geyser and fell back into her eyes. The last vision that Sue witnessed was that of a maroon colored sky as she slipped into death.

Done with Sue the two of them licked their lips and rose up to see Malachi, a male named Strader, and Sherona looking over towards the east where the remainder of their

group, two females named Gethina and Kanice, were coming from. Gethina was leading a bloodied Travis while Kanice drug an unconscious Beth.

Malachi grinned. "You two have done well."

Gethina pushed Travis and he fell at Malachi's feet, his face landing in a pool of dirt and blood. Malachi knelt down in front of him. "Hi, Travis. You don't know me but I know an awful lot about you. There is something about you that I don't know and I'm going to need for you to give me the answer. I need to know who gave you the picture."

"Did he send you?"

"You're really not in a position to be asking me questions, boy. I'm going to ask you one more time before I make you watch as I kill your girlfriend. So, who's your source?"

"What's the point? All you're going to do is kill us anyway, whether I tell you or not."

"Have it your way." He walked over to Beth and slapped her hard across the face a few times to wake her up. "What's your name, dear?"

"Beth," she answered, still dazed.

"I want you to see something, Beth." He extended his hand out to her but she was reluctant to accept. "Don't worry, it's okay."

She took his hand and he helped her to her feet, walking back over to Travis who was now sitting up. Beth locked eyes with him and tears began to flow from her eyes.

"Is there anything that you would like to say to him before you die?" asked Malachi, standing behind her now. "Maybe you can tell him that you love him one last time."

Her eyes got wide. "Travis..."

Malachi snapped her neck, spinning her head all the way around.

“No!!” cried out Travis as Malachi pushed her body to the side.

“Well Travis, it’s your call. Give me your source and maybe I don’t kill everyone left in this bullshit town of yours. If you don’t then I’ll wipe this town off the map.”

“Go to Hell.”

Malachi cracked a smile before lifting his leg and kicking Travis squarely in the face, busting it up like a tomato being smashed by a sledgehammer. Travis fell over, blood erupting from the many fractures to his face, and Malachi let loose on him, raining down kicks and stomps upon him until Travis’ body looked like marinara sauce.

When the kicking finally ended the seven of them stood and took a look around, surrounded by the pile of dead bodies that was left in their wake. There were devilish smiles on their faces as they admired their kills like the hunters that they were, marveling at the awesome amount of destruction that they had managed to create in such a short amount of time. As was natural since he was their undisputed leader, all eyes shifted over to Malachi as he lifted his head ever so slightly, closed his eyes and then inhaled deeply through his nose. His eyes opened and he then looked over towards the direction of a portable bathroom that was a couple dozen yards away. “There’s one alive. Strader, bring him to me.”

The one known as Strader gave Malachi a nod and then proceeded over to the bathroom, his hulking frame that was slightly larger than Malachi’s moving with the grace and finesse of a ballet dancer. He grabbed a hold of the door and peeled it from its hinges to reveal a little boy cowering on the toilet with a wheelchair folded up next to him. His face was painted to resemble that of a vampire with fake blood spilling from the

corners of his mouth and his face covered in white powder except for under his eyes where tears had washed it all away.

“Please don’t hurt me!” he cried out, fearing that his plea was going to fall on deaf ears.

The boy’s begging brought a menacing smile to Strader’s face. “I’m not going to hurt you but I can’t say the same for the rest of them.” He motioned over to the wheelchair. “Do you need that to get around in?”

“Yes.”

Strader took the wheelchair and opened it up on the ground, lifting the boy from his seat on the toilet and setting him down in it. For the first time he got to see what all the screaming and commotion was about as Strader wheeled him over to Malachi and the rest of the crew, maneuvering his chair through the blood and around the bodies. They came to a stop in front of Malachi who towered above him and must have looked like a blood soaked God.

Malachi got down on one knee to address the boy. “Do I scare you?”

The boy nodded his head up and down to signify yes.

“Good. Believe it or not people that are scared tend to have the ability to listen and understand better than those that aren’t. I like to think that it has something to do with a person’s will to survive. What’s your name?”

“Michael but my friends call me Mikey.”

“Do you have a lot of friends?”

Michael looked around at the pile of dead bodies and then back up at Malachi. “I used to.”

“My condolences. I, too, know what it’s like to lose friends and, like I had to do, you will need to make new and better friends to replace them. Can my friends and I be your friends, Michael?”

Michael slowly scanned the blood stained faces of Malachi and his friends. Deep down he wanted to say no but he feared what would happen if he were to deny them. “Sure.”

“We appreciate that, Mikey. Friendship is the best thing that you can give someone and it’s something that the world is severely lacking in this day and age. How old are you?”

“Nine.”

“Nine you say? Such a young one you are. It appears from your face paint that you like vampires.”

“Yeah, I think that they’re cool.” His eyes took in the bodies before he continued. “Are you a vampire?”

“Would you believe me if I told you that we were?”

“Yes. You definitely look like a vampire. I thought you guys didn’t exist.”

“You would be surprised at what really exists in this world, Mikey. People have been brainwashed into thinking we’re not real but, as you can now see, we are definitely real.” He ran the claw on his index finger over one of the wheels on the wheelchair.

“What is the reason that you are confined to this chair?”

A look of anger briefly flashed across Michael’s face but it wasn’t so brief that Malachi didn’t take notice of it. “I was in an off road accident last year with my father. I was sitting in his lap while he was driving an ATV when he somehow lost control and

ran into a fence, sending me flying about fifteen feet down the path where I landed on my back. The doctors told me that I would never be able to walk again.”

“And your father? Was he hurt?”

“A few cuts and bruises but that was about it.”

“That doesn’t seem fair, he being in the wrong but you having to do all the suffering. The world is a very cruel place, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. I used to be angry about it but not so much anymore. After it happened my parents told me that I was simply dealt a bad hand in life and that I needed to make the most out of it.”

“Are your parents here?”

“My father is at home but my mother is over there...,” he answered, gesturing towards a woman’s body that rested over near a teacups-styled ride, a large gaping wound on her throat. “I can recognize the skirt that she was wearing.”

“Does that make you sad, seeing her like that?”

“No because she was a bitch anyway,” he said without hesitation.

Malachi grinned. “You know what, Mikey, I say that your parents were, and are, full of shit. You should be angry; you should be fucking furious! Your father broke you and your mother allowed it to happen.”

“It wasn’t his fault!” Michael screamed back at him.

The rage that Michael displayed was pleasing to Malachi. “Wasn’t it? How does it make you feel knowing that you’ll never be able to walk, never be able to drive, and always being looked down upon and pitied like a puppy with a gimpy leg? Is that how you imagined your life to be? Is that the life you want?”

Michael said nothing, electing to stare down at the ground instead.

“Answer me!!” demanded Malachi, his voice booming as he took his hand and forced Michael’s head up. “Tell me how you feel. You hate him, don’t you? You hate the both of them.”

“Yes,” he answered softly a few seconds later, a frightening look on his young face as he was finally able to let go and release all of the weight that had been holding him down. “I want to break him just like he broke me.”

The others smiled, knowing that Michael had just taken the bait – hook, line, and sinker. Malachi caressed Michael’s face like he was own son. “I can provide you with a new set of cards. I can heal you and make it to where you will no longer need a wheelchair. You’ll have a new body that will be stronger than you could ever imagine. How does that sound?”

“Really?” he asked, unable to contain his enthusiasm.

“I can make you a god, Mikey; no longer will you have to paint your face like a vampire because you’ll be one. The only thing I ask from you is your loyalty.”

The idea of that thrilled him to no end. “Okay.”

The broad shouldered and intimidating Gethina walked up and stood beside Michael. “Hello Michael,” she greeted him. “My name is Gethina.”

Michael looked up at her. “Hello.” He glanced over at Malachi. “Will it hurt?”

“Just for a second,” he answered. “Once you’re ready it will begin.”

“I’m ready.” He closed his eyes and then exhaled, gripping his wheelchair tightly as Gethina bent down and sunk her teeth into his neck, transferring her essence into him. Michael’s body jerked forward and his back arched inward. The popping and stretching

sounds of his spine fusing together and mending itself was heard by each of them. His eyes popped open, silver swirling through his iris and corneas until they filled in completely, signaling the completeness of his transformation.

Her job complete Gethina backed away from Michael, licking the small drops of blood from her lips with a troubled look on her face.

Malachi stood up and offered his hand out to Michael who took it and slowly rose from the chair that had served as his prison for the past year. He looked down at his legs, unsure at first if they would hold him up, but then smiling as they didn't tremble or weaken from his weight, instead supporting him like two strong pillars.

"How do you feel?" inquired Malachi as he let go of Michael's hand.

"Invincible," he replied, still marveling at his new body. He made fists with both of his hands, feeling the layers of new muscle in his arms flex with each motion. Using his tongue he ran it across the points of his fangs.

"Good. I believe that there was someone that you wanted to see."

An evil grin crossed Michael's face. "Oh yes."

*

Insulated from the outside world Peter sat on the couch watching the Milwaukee Brewers baseball game on television. Clean shaven and fit he was dressed in beige slacks and a black Polo shirt, looking like he was about to go play a round of golf. A full can of Milwaukee's Best beer was held in his hand while four empty cans sat on the table between his propped up feet.

The screen door opened and Peter could hear the all too familiar sound of Michael's wheelchair as it rolled across the hardwood floor. Entering the living room it came to a stop directly in front of the television, blocking his father's view.

"Where's your mother?" he asked, looking a bit uneasy as Michael stared a hole in him with his lifeless eyes. He flirted with the idea that Michael somehow looked different to him – something to do with his eyes, maybe – but he chalked that thought up to the alcohol.

"She's still at the fair," he answered, never breaking eye contact with his father.

"Then how did you get home? I know that you didn't roll all the way here on your own."

"I made some new friends and they gave me a lift."

"Good for you; I'm glad that you were able to make some friends." He was really beginning to get the sense that something wasn't right. "Is there something wrong, son?"

"Not anymore there isn't, father."

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I meant to tell you that I had a little bit of free time at work yesterday and, after getting approval from my boss, I was able to make a few adjustments to the suit that I've been working on for you. It's similar to a prototype that we've been working on for the military, minus the weapons, of course. You'll be out of that chair soon enough and will no longer be my little roller derby."

"I don't like when you call me that," he said, his voice getting deeper and more guttural. "It really pisses me off."

“I’m sorry, son,” he apologized, starting to be afraid now, “I didn’t know how strongly you disliked that nickname. I won’t ever call you that again. Do you mind moving out of the way so that I can see the TV?”

Michael swung backwards and his fist connected with the television, shattering it into hundreds of pieces.

Peter sat up on the couch, wide eyed and in shock. “What the fuck?!?!” He set his beer down and stood up, looking on in disbelief at the smoke and sparks that continued to bellow from his precious television. His anger level was at nuclear as he pointed a finger at Michael. “Boy, I don’t know what’s gotten into you but you just signed your fucking death certificate!”

“Fuck you,” Michael responded calmly which only served to infuriate his father even more.

Taken aback by Michael’s new rebellious attitude Peter walked around the table and stood in front of Michael, his finger now an inch away from Michael’s nose. “Listen you little mother...”

Quick as lightning Michael’s mouth opened wide – wider than a human’s normally would though Peter – and then bit down, his father’s hand disappearing inside of his mouth. Peter instinctively pulled away, coming back with a blood streaming nub where his fingers used to be. His eyes were the size of dinner plates and his body shook as he looked down at Michael, watching in horror as his fingers were spit onto the floor like shells from sunflower seeds.

Michael slowly rose up from his wheelchair, much to the surprise of his father. Upon seeing this he began to backpedal, falling over the table and knocking the beer cans

to the floor. Michael stood over his father and smiled, feeling good to have the upper hand on him for once in life. Peter saw the fangs as they protruded from Michael's mouth and instantly knew that he was fucked. "What the fuck has happened to you?!?"

Michael picked his wheelchair up and jammed one of the wheels into his father's throat, blood flying out of his mouth as his windpipe was crushed. Michael set the wheelchair down onto the floor, blood dripping from the rubber of the tire. He lifted his father up, his nine year old body now possessing the strength of three grown men. "I won a great prize at the fair; can you guess what it was?" He tossed his father through the air, sending him flying through the wall and crashing into the bathroom on the other side, landing face down in the tub with a thud that knocked all of the wind out of him. He started coughing, blood flying out of his mouth with each hack.

Michael casually stepped inside the bathroom from the hole that his father just created and took a seat on the toilet. Watching his father as he struggled to get up he dug into his pocket for a piece of bubble gum which he proceeded to pop into his mouth, chewing it and blowing bubbles with a wicked smile on his face.

"This is quite the turn of events, huh? I mean, when the sun rose this morning who would have thought that our roles would be reversed and the rabbit would be the one holding the gun?"

Peter stumbled out of the tub, a painful yell struggling to emerge out of his smashed in throat as his fingerless hand landed on the floor and sent an electrifying pulse of pain through his body. He used his good hand to pull himself across the floor, leaving a trail of blood as he tried to make it to the bathroom door.

“You have no idea how much I’ve looked forward to this day,” he continued, still watching his father crawl, “but I never thought that it would actually happen. What do I do now? You always think about what you’re going to do until you actually get in the position to do it and, when that time arrives, it’s like your mind goes blank.”

He stood up and walked over next to his father who had now managed to make it out of the bathroom and into the hallway. “On the way here I wondered if I was even capable of killing you. I knew that I wanted to but I wasn’t sure that, when I saw you, if I would change my mind or not. I then had the thought that, instead of killing you, maybe I would simply return the favor of the situation that you put me in. After a lot of back and forth I finally came to a decision.”

He grabbed his father by the shirt, lifting him up over his head. “You used to be like Superman to me, dad,” he told him as he stared him in the eye, “but then the accident happened and it was like a light switch was flipped on and I could finally see the light and come to the realization that you were no hero; you were a fraud wearing Superman’s cape.” He brought his father’s back down upon his knee with both hands, cracking it and shattering his spinal cord before tossing him onto the floor in a broken heap. “Goodbye, father.”

A feeling of relief crept over him as he exited the bathroom and walked out the front door to where Malachi and the others stood waiting.

“Well?” asked Malachi.

“He will die shortly; I want him to suffer first.”

“Good.” Malachi turned around, surveying the remaining houses and businesses in the town. “Our work here is not done. Find everyone that’s left in this town and kill them; all of them.”

Chapter 5

Martin Campbell sat inside the lobby of the VSL, or Vampire Savings & Loan as it was known by a select few, nervously tapping his left hand against his leg. He was a baby-faced man who looked to about forty-five with a head full of jet black hair that had been slicked back like Pat Riley. Spying a piece of lint on his dark blue slacks he reached down and plucked it off, wanting his outfit to be flawless as he attempted to make a great first impression.

He glanced up to find a man walking towards him with a file tucked under his arm, a man that had a generous smile on his face that helped to erase some of the uneasiness that Martin was currently feeling. The man walked up and stood in front of him. “Are you Mr. Campbell?”

Martin rose to his feet. “Yes I am.”

“Glad to meet you. My name is Demonte Hawkins and I’m going to be assisting you today.” He extended his hand out to Martin and they shook, Martin being sure to give him a very solid grip. “You look nervous – can I interest you in something to drink like water or a soft drink?”

“I’m a little nervous but I’m okay.”

“There’s no need to be nervous,” he assured him. “Follow me, let’s see what I can do for you.”

Martin followed Demonte over to his cube and then took a seat. He took notice of a picture of Demonte and a very pretty woman at a party of some sorts on Demonte’s desk.

“Is this your wife, Mr. Hawkins?”

He smiled at the mention of her as he sat down and looked over at the picture. “Yes sir it is. Believe it or not today is our one year wedding anniversary.”

“Congratulations, Mr. Hawkins, your wife is absolutely radiant. You are a very lucky man.”

“Thank you,” he replied, his cheeks turning from pale to light rouge as he blushed. “She has made my life worthwhile. It’s not always easy to make it through life as a vampire but she has helped to soften the blow considerably.”

“May I ask if you have, or plan to have, any children?”

“Not at this time we don’t. My wife and I have had several discussions about it and we’ve come to the conclusion that the timing isn’t right. Until we no longer have to hide what we are we shall refrain from having children. I’m not sure how things will be if humans ever do find out that we exist.”

Martin nodded his head in approval. “I understand. It took a long time before my wife and I decided to have children, also. May God continue to bless you and your family.”

“Thank you. As nice as it has been you didn’t come here to talk about me, Mr. Campbell; we’re here to talk about you.”

“That we are.”

He opened up Martin’s file and then began typing information into his computer. “It looks like you’ve had an account with us for a little over five years now.”

“That is correct with never having a single overdraft charge or anything during that time.”

“Yes, I can see that.” He looked from his computer over to Martin. “It says on your application that you’re seeking a \$5000 loan. Can you elaborate on the reason that you need the loan?”

“Of course.” He sat up in his seat, making and keeping eye contact with Demonte. “I’m a very proud man, Mr. Hawkins, and it is very hard for me to ask anyone for anything. I recently used all the money I had in savings to get my daughter into college and, as much as I wanted to ask my family for the money that I need, my pride wouldn’t let me do it. I’ve always tried to live an honorable life, both as a vampire and when I was human, but my family and I have been plagued by a series of bad luck recently. Some vandals, humans I believe them to be, damaged both my vehicle and house, spray painting the latter with words that I don’t dare mention. My car insurance covered the damage to my vehicle but my home owner’s insurance would not cover all of the damage to my house. I could sit here and speculate but, regardless of the reason why it was declined, that is the reason I’m humbling myself in front of you today.”

Demonte shook his head up and down, knowing full well what Martin was talking about. “I can understand and sympathize with you. Members of my wife’s family have been targeted by vandals due to being...,” he made a set of quotation marks with his fingers, “...different. It’s hard to sit back and be calm when what you really want to do is rip them apart. I’m sorry, I guess that wasn’t very politically correct of me, was it?”

Martin smiled. “To me the term politically correct is an oxymoron. I can appreciate your passion. Were you turned or born as a vampire, Mr. Hawkins?”

“I’m a pure blood vampire, born in 1796.”

“Ah, I see. You’re still a young buck; you haven’t even hit your prime yet.”

“I hope you’re right about that.” He looked down at the open file, his eyes studying the loan application. “You have a very stable work history; that’s good. I also see that you are only requesting six months to pay back the loan – is that correct?”

“Yes, that is correct. I’m due to get a significant bonus in a few months and I just need this loan to stabilize things until the bonus comes through.”

A grin crossed Demonte’s face as he looked over at Martin. “I like you, Mr. Campbell. My job requires that I analyze numbers but on top of that, and probably most importantly, it demands that I also gauge the person as well and I am pleased to say that I get a good vibe from you. I’ve been doing this a while and sometimes a person’s credit can be exemplary but there’s something about them that makes you reconsider the loan and vice versa; a person’s credit may not be the best but they have a good aura about them that will override the shortcomings of their credit. Long story short, I’m going to approve your loan.”

He almost burst into tears. “You are truly a great man, Mr. Hawkins! You have no idea how much this will help my family and I. You give me hope for the future of our race. You are in my favor; anything you need you can count on me.”

“All that I ask is for you to pay your loan back and not make me look like an ass by approving it.”

“Nonsense,” replied Martin. “You said that today is your anniversary, right?”

“Yes sir.”

“You should take your wife to The Red Room and show her a good time that she’ll never forget.”

“I would love to but I don’t even know where it is. The Red Room is legendary for its secrecy. Sometimes I doubt if it even really exists – it’s mentioned in back rooms and whispered about but no one seems to know anything about it.”

“Believe me, it does exist. I have a connection there and I will provide you with the address. I can’t emphasize strongly enough that the information I’m about to present you with should remain only with you and should not be discussed with anyone, your wife excluded of course. There have been extreme repercussions for those with loose lips, not that I believe that you would ever find yourself in that category.”

He reached over and grabbed a sticky note and a pen from Demonte’s desk, writing down the word *Strigo Embassy* and then handing it to Demonte. “Go here and make sure to wear something nice. They’ll be expecting you.”

*

The cold water from the faucet hit his face with a splash. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror David Trusseau shut the water off and then lathered up his pretty boy face with shaving cream. Picking up a razor he placed it underneath the sideburn on the right side of his face and then slowly brought it down, stubble disappearing and revealing smooth skin the color of school chalk underneath. As he went to rinse the razor he quickly glanced over to the door and then smiled as he turned back to the mirror. “I know you’re there, Jacquelyn.”

A giggle was heard before she stepped from the side and into the doorway, looking like a porcelain doll with her smooth white skin and rosy lips. She looked to about seven and had a face that was brimming with mischief. “How did you know?”

“Because I’m your big brother and I know everything.”

“Yeah right.” She walked over and stood by the toilet, looking up at her big brother who she obviously adored. “You getting ready for work?”

“That I am. What are you up to?”

“Nothing. I’m bored; can I stay in here with you?”

“Sure. Do you wanna help me shave?” She shook her head no so he turned away from the mirror and looked down at her. “No? Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to cut you.”

“That’s ridiculous; come here.” He bent down and then lifted her up, setting her down on the edge of the sink. He then handed her the razor and knelt down beside her so that he could be level with her. “Alright, do you see where I already made the first stroke?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“Good. Okay, now put the razor right next to that line.”

She placed the razor on his face. “Right here?”

“Almost.” He placed his hand on top of hers and guided the razor over to the right about half an inch. “That should do it. Now, slowly pull the razor all the way down. Be firm but don’t apply too much pressure.”

“Okay.” She did as he instructed her to do, leaving a perfect path of smooth skin on his face. “How’s that?”

He stood up and studied his face in the mirror after which he looked over at her as she awaited his stamp of approval. “That is quite possibly the best shave that I’ve ever had.”

“You lie!!”

“No, I swear. You sure that you haven’t done this before?”

She laughed. “Can I do it again?”

“You certainly can; do it just like you did the last one.”

“Okay,” she said, more excitement in her voice this time. He faced the mirror again and she placed the razor back against the side of his face. She scraped the razor down his cheek, this time pressing a little too hard and driving the blades into his skin. The sight of the blood frightened her, causing her to drop the razor into the sink where it splashed into the water. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

He quickly turned and attempted to console her. “It’s okay. Look, it’s almost gone.”

Peeking through the fingers that covered her eyes she saw that he was right, the blood had already clotted and the cut was healing itself. Two seconds later his cheek was as good as new, looking like nothing had ever happened to it.

“Voila, just like magic. See, you didn’t hurt me; I’m all better. Can you give me a smile.”

She lowered her hands from her eyes and offered him a modest grin.

“You can do better than that.” He took the index fingers on both of his hands and used them to gently jab her on the side of her stomach, causing her to explode with giggles. “That’s my girl.”

*

Demonte gently closed the door to his upscale apartment and set his briefcase down on the floor next to the kitchen table. His ears picked up the sound of music coming from the back room so he made his way towards it, loosening his tie as he made the journey.

He walked past the bathroom and the bedroom until he got to the office which is where the music was originating from. Stopping and standing in the doorway, he watched his wife as she sat at the computer reading an article on the internet. Her head bobbed up and down to the beat as she sang along to Alicia Keys. Slow as a turtle and quiet as a dog whistle he crept up on her until he was standing right behind her, placing his hands over her eyes and causing her to jump in fright. He moved his hands as she turned in her chair to face him.

“God I hate you sometimes!” she told him through a dimpled smile as she placed her hand over her heart which continued to beat rapidly.

“It’s a good thing that you love me all the time then.”

“That is true.” She stood up and gave him a deep kiss which she then followed up with a playful punch to his gut.

“Owww!”

“That’s for scaring me.”

“I guess I had that coming. Happy anniversary, Jada. I love you so much.”

She gazed lovingly into his eyes, a look of love on her bone colored face. “I love you, too. It’s been a wonderful year.”

“True.”

“Dance with me.”

“I would love to.” She placed her arms around his head as his hands found their way to her waist and together they moved back and forth to the music. “You’re beautiful, did you know that?”

She blushed. “I’ve been told that once or twice. You’re not so bad looking yourself.”

“Why thank you.”

“You’re welcome. How was work?”

“Not too bad. I got the chance to talk about you a little bit today.”

“I hope that you had some good things to say. To whom were you talking about me to?”

“A guy named Martin Campbell that I approved a loan for.”

“I’m happy to hear that you were thinking about me enough to talk about.”

“You know that you’re always on my mind. Hey, you still have that sexy black dress that I like, don’t you?”

“I do; why do you ask? You didn’t go out and spend a lot of money did you? I told you not to go overboard like you usually do with gifts.”

“I was good this time. What would you say if I told you that tonight we have a reservation at The Red Room?”

She lifted her head off of his chest and eyed him in disbelief. “I would say that I didn’t believe you. THE Red Room? How did you manage to do that?”

“To show his appreciation to me for approving his loan Mr. Campbell got us in. He said that he had a connection there and that we needed to be sure to wear something nice. Our reservation is at 7:00.”

“Do you believe him?” she asked, still questioning the possibility of this being real.

“I have no reason to doubt him. He seemed like a real genuine guy plus I have all of his information so, if he is lying, I can show up at his house and kick his ass.”

She chuckled. “You’re silly. I hope that it’s legit.”

“There’s only one way to find out. You better hurry up and get ready; time’s a tickin’.”

*

The maroon Lexus pulled up in front of the valet stand at the Strigo Embassy hotel where two impeccably dressed valets were waiting. As the car came to a stop one of the two valets walked over and opened the driver’s side door while the other took care of the passenger’s side.

Demonte emerged from the driver’s seat dressed in a fantastic black suit while Jada stepped out from the passenger’s seat in a swanky black mini dress, matching stiletto heels, and a silver necklace from which a deep red ruby in the shape of a heart hung from, nestled between her pushed up bosom.

“Welcome to the Strigo Embassy,” the valet named Marco greeted Jada as he took her right hand and assisted her from the vehicle.

“Thank you,” she told him as she straightened her dress.

“Good evening, sir,” the other valet, this one named Russell, addressed Demonte, “welcome to the Strigo Embassy.” He gave Demonte a ticket to claim his vehicle and then got into the car, driving it over to the valet parking area.

Demonte pulled out his wallet and placed the ticket into it as he walked over and stood beside his wife.

“Welcome to the Strigo Embassy,” Marco said to Demonte.

“Hello.” He pulled a ten dollar bill from his wallet and tried to pass it to Marco.

“Valet parking is a complimentary service provided to our valued guests and tipping is not allowed here,” he politely told him, refusing the money. He opened the heavy glass door that led into the lobby. “Enjoy your evening.”

“Okay,” replied Demonte, surprised by the valet’s words, “thank you.” Demonte placed the cash back into his wallet and then stuffed the wallet inside the inner pocket of his suit jacket. He took Jada’s hand and together they walked into the exquisitely designed lobby, their shoes landing on eggshell colored marble. A golden bubbling fountain provided the soundtrack as they absorbed the place, their heads rising in unison as they stared up at the elevator that rose so high up in the air that the top floor could have only been Heaven.

“Wow baby, this is nice.”

“That’s an understatement,” he told her, admiring the many great pieces of art that adorned the golden wallpaper. He glanced over to the far left side of the lobby where three reservationists – two women and a man – stood behind a counter. The two women were busy helping guests while the man was free to simply smile at everyone that passed through.

“Maybe he can tell us where to go,” remarked Jada as she followed Demonte’s eyes. They made their way over to the counter, walking slowly as they continued to marvel at all the sights.

“How can I help you?” asked the gentleman, flashing them a smile that mostly concealed the fangs in his mouth.

“Hi, I was told to be at this address at seven but I’m not sure that I’m in the right place,” answered Demonte.

“Let me see what I can find. What’s your name?”

“It’s Demonte.”

He typed Demonte’s name into his computer and then looked back up at him with a welcoming smile on his face. “Mr. Hawkins, of course; we’ve been expecting you. You and your lovely wife are our special guests this evening.” He reached under the counter and pulled out a keycard which he held out to Demonte. “We have you reserved for room 154.”

Jada and Demonte exchanged confused looks. “There must be some kind of mistake,” explained Demonte. “We have a reservation for dinner not a room.”

“There is no mistake, Mr. Hawkins,” he told him, pushing the card into Demonte’s palm. “Room 154 is going to be straight ahead and then you’re going to make a left at the hall.”

Still baffled Demonte and Jada reluctantly did as they were told, heading through the lobby and making a left at the hallway which was short and dead-ended into room 154. They stopped in front of the door, both wondering what they should do next.

Jada’s eyes were fixed on the door. “Now what?”

“I don’t know; I guess we need to figure out what’s behind the door.” He placed the keycard into the slot and then pulled it out, the light on the device changing from red to green followed by the sound of the door being unlocked.

Demonte placed his hand on the knob and then slowly opened the door into a room that was cascaded by candle light. They stepped inside, their feet being cushioned by a plush crimson carpet that covered every square inch of the floor. Off to the left stood a lady behind a podium and next to her was an elevator.

“Welcome to The Red Room, Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins, and allow me to be the first to wish you a happy one year anniversary,” she greeted them.

“Thank you,” answered Jada as they stepped up to the podium.

“May I have your keycard, please; you won’t need it any longer.”

“Sure.” Demonte passed the card to her.

“Thank you.” She placed the card down and then typed in a few numbers on her keyboard. Once she did that the silver doors to the elevator slid open with a soft hiss.

“Please step inside,” she instructed them, waving towards the elevator. “It will take you down to the restaurant.”

Demonte and Jada walked over and got inside.

“Enjoy your meal.”

The door to the elevator closed, leaving them all alone and full of curiosity as they ran their hands along the smooth, brushed steel walls. There were no buttons of any kind – it was as if they were inside of a test tube. They could feel a gentle shake as they began their twenty second descent after which time the door opened to reveal a young woman standing with her hands behind her back.

“Welcome, my name is Angela. Please follow me and I’ll take you to your table.”

They followed her through the restaurant, letting the sound of the man tickling the ivories soak into their ears. The piano was the centerpiece of the room and of the tables – twenty-five in total, all of which were occupied except for one – surrounded it on all sides. Each table was covered by a blood red tablecloth upon which a white vase with three red roses sat.

Arriving at their table Demonte pulled Jada's chair out for her and Angela took the red napkin from the table and placed it across her lap, doing the same for Demonte once he took his seat.

"I understand that this is your first time here."

"Oh yes," answered Jada as her eyes continued to scour the room and take in everything.

"You're in for quite a treat then. The Red Room prides itself on creating a cherished and exclusive atmosphere for our patrons who are here strictly by invitation only and, in cases like yours, are recommended to us by one of our members. Other than the exclusivity, what really sets us apart from any other restaurant in the world is our one of a kind cuisine."

"Excuse me, Angela," Demonte interrupted her, "but what exactly do you serve here?"

"Humans," she answered matter of factly.

"Oh," replied Demonte, not expecting that to be her answer.

Before either of them could follow up with any more questions an older gentleman dressed in an expensive looking navy pinstriped suit approached the table and stood next to Angela. "Good evening Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins," he addressed them in his heavy French accent, "my name is Jean Carlos and I'm one of the managers here at The Red Room." He shook hands with Demonte and followed that up with a kiss on Jada's hand. "How are you doing tonight? Well, I hope."

"Very well," replied Jada. "You have a wonderful place here."

"Thank you. We strive to create a memorable experience for our guests."

“Well you have definitely succeeded,” stated Demonte.

“Again, my thanks. My cousin Martin informed me that you had helped him out of a bind and any friend of his is a friend of mine.” He looked over at Angela. “Will you bring out two glasses and a bottle of Australian O Positive, please?”

“Sure.” She took off towards the back of the restaurant.

“Did Angela explain our menu to you?”

“Just that you serve humans,” answered Demonte. “You arrived before she had a chance to get any further into it.”

“Okay, no problem. What we do here is cater to vampires who like the finer foods but do not want or feel the need to have to...” he paused for a second and thought over his words, “... get it for themselves if you know what I mean. Due to the sensitive nature of what we deal with and the level of discretion involved we don’t and can’t let just anyone into our establishment. We are not an Arby’s or a Red Lobster that caters to the masses; we have a higher standard here. All of our produce is fresh and we keep a nice selection on hand at all times. Do either of you have a preference of a certain nationality that you would like?”

“Wow, it’s been so long since I’ve had human meat that I really couldn’t tell you what my favorite is,” answered Demonte. “What about you, babe?”

“I was always partial to Caucasian meat, especially that of the younger women. I don’t know what it is about them but their meat always seemed so much richer and tastier to me. Do you have any of those in stock?”

“But of course we do. Would you like the same, sir, or do you have a different preference?”

“I think I’ll have the same.”

“Very good. What I’ll do then is set you both up with our seven course sampler platter which will provide you with a rich assortment of some of the tastiest pieces of human flesh and organs including the heart, of course, as well as our version of sushi rolls, a brisk salad with diced lung and, my personal favorite, liver tar-tar. Does that sound okay?”

“Yes it does!” they both answered enthusiastically.

“Good, good.”

Angela returned to the table, two wine glasses held by their stem in one hand and a corked bottle in the other.

“Excellent, the wine is here!” Jean Carlos took the bottle out of her hand while Angela set a glass down in front of both Jada and Demonte. “This is my favorite of all the wines that we have in house,” he said as he removed the cork and proceeded to fill their glasses with the thick and deep burgundy colored blood. “I’ve found over the years that Australians have a purer taste to them than any other nationality and the O Positive ones have such subtle undertones to them that really help to bring out the flavor. Please try it.”

They each took a sip. “This is delicious,” remarked Jada as she licked the remnants of blood from her lips. “I like that you serve it warm.”

“We keep it at ninety-eight degrees so that it has that fresh from the jugular taste and texture to it.”

Demonte took a second and much longer sip. “Truly fantastic. Drinking it makes me feel so, so, so…”

“Alive?” asked Jean Carlos.

“Yes, that’s the word I was looking for, alive! I need to start pacing myself or I’ll end up drinking the whole bottle.”

“No worries, Mr. Hawkins, drink as much as you like. You are a VIP guest and everything is on the house tonight. If you happen to finish this bottle then we will provide you with another. I have to make my rounds but Angela will make sure to take good care of you. I will check back with you two later on.”

“Sure thing,” said Demonte, inclined to take another drink.

Jean Carlos turned his attention over to Angela. “They’re going to be having the seven course sampler from our stock of young Caucasian women and see to it that they have as much wine as they can drink and anything else they want.”

“Of course, sir.”

He turned back to Jada and Demonte. “I’ll leave you two now. Enjoy your meal.”

*

The kitchen area of The Red Room was running like a well oiled machine and there was no wasted motion by anyone – everyone was professional and knew what their role was. The sound of food being plated could be heard along with the occasional chatter amongst the cooks as they went about their business.

Angela stepped into the kitchen and handed a ticket over to the kitchen manager, a short round man that was built like a tank.

“Thanks, Angie.” He quickly scanned the order and then turned towards his waiting crew. “Listen up, new ticket in and this is for a special table so let’s make sure to get this one perfect,” he called out loud and clear so that everyone could hear. “I need two seven course CYG’s quick fast and in a hurry.”

“Yes chef!” they answered back.

One of the cooks looked around his station and then over to the prepping area where David stood chopping up some carrots and red onions. “David!!” he yelled out.

David glanced over at him, wiping sweat from his brow. “Yeah?”

“Can you grab me a CYG from the cooler?”

“Sure.”

David left his area, making a right over to where a massive walk-in cooler was located. A blanket of cool air with an aroma of fear and human waste hit him as he opened the door. Inside, a walkway went straight down the middle and on each side was cages in which humans, all still alive, were kept. The cages were thin and only allowed their prisoners to stand and nothing else. Their hands and feet were bound like they were hung on a cross and their mouths were gagged, though it didn't stop them from trying to scream out.

This scene was nothing new for him but it didn't stop his heart from dropping just as the temperature did every time that he stepped foot inside here. He quickly surveyed the captives, a group that was as diverse as any that you would find at a mall or any other public place on any given day of the week. Traveling down the walkway he purposely kept his eyes low, trying not to make eye contact with any of them; it was already bad enough that he could hear their cries and he didn't want to compound that feeling by witnessing the anguish on their faces, too.

Near the back he found what he was looking for, a young white teenage girl with curly blond hair and an amazing set of blue eyes – it was Jessica. He allowed himself to make eye contact with her and forced himself to hold it for almost a full minute, his heart

full of remorse. He thought that she looked somehow familiar to him but he couldn't place from where he may have seen her. He tried to imagine what she must have been feeling and who she may have been before she ended up here. Was she someone's sister, daughter, favorite aunt maybe? Whatever she may have been it didn't matter now; all she would be now was missed.

"I'm sorry," he told her as he got behind her cage and began to wheel it out to the kitchen to be cut up and served. She tried to scream but the effect was minimal as the gag muffled it all. A stream of urine rushed down her leg and left a trail on the floor as they exited the cooler.

*

It was dark inside Jacquelyn's room except for a small sliver of light from the living room that took the edge off of the darkness. She was curled up under the covers, her favorite teddy bear – named Teddy, of course – lying next to her and the reflection of the light off of her eyes letting it be known that she was still very much awake. She laid there for a few minutes but then sat up at the sound of the front door opening, hearing the sound of her brother's voice as he greeted mom and dad and then made his way towards his bedroom. On his way he had to pass her room and she called out to him as he did.

"David."

He stopped in front of her door and pushed it open a little bit. "You still awake, munchkin?" He entered the room, setting his bag of work clothes down by the door as he went over and sat down on the bed next to her. "It's late; you should have been asleep hours ago."

"I know but I don't like going to bed without telling you goodnight first."

“That’s sweet of you.”

“Did you have a good time at work?”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret – nobody has a good time at work, that’s why they call it work instead of play.”

“It’s gotta be fun sometimes, right?”

“Sometimes but very rarely.”

“What kind of work do you do? You never talk about it.”

“It’s not really something that I enjoy talking about. Maybe when you’re older we can discuss it but not right now. I will let you know that I work at a restaurant, though.”

“Is it a McDonald’s?” she asked, her eyes sparkling at the thought of the golden arches.

“No, silly girl,” he told her, a smile on his face. “Believe it or not there are other places to eat at besides McDonald’s.”

“Do you have a lot of friends there?”

“I wouldn’t call them friends; they’re more like associates.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, associates are people that you only deal with at work but your friends are the people that you talk to and hang out with after work. For example, all the kids that you go to school with aren’t your friends but you probably talk to a lot of them, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I know that you do have a few that you do talk to after school as well like that little girl Polly Campbell that you walk home with after school. She would be

considered your friend while everyone else would be considered an associate of yours, though you're a little too young to really have associates. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I think so. Are there any humans at your job or is it all vampires?"

There were a few seconds of silence as he stared at her, reflecting on the cages full of humans and what happened after they were taken out of the cages. "There are a few humans but not too many," he told her, brushing hair away from her face.

"Are they nice to you?"

"They're ok. Why do you ask?"

"Because I overheard mom and dad talking about humans after I got in bed. Dad called them animals and said that it was only a matter of time before they found out about our species and then turned on us. Why would they do that? Are humans really that bad?"

"First of all, all humans aren't bad. You shouldn't let dad's opinion of them mold what you think about them. You may come to find out that you like humans and they may treat you wonderfully. All people, regardless of whether they are human or vampire, have the same ability to be good just as they do to be bad. If you stereotype a whole race of people then you miss out on a lot of positivity that they may have and the ability to learn something from them that you may have never known. As to why they would fear us, it's a combination of things. They would fear us because we're different from them and because we're stronger than they are. If they took the time to get to know us then they may grow to like us."

"Do you ever want to be human?"

"No, I'm very happy with who I am. I take it that you've had that thought?"

"Every now and then it will cross my mind."

“You should be proud of what you are – you’re a very beautiful little lady. That’s something that you should always remember. Now, I need you to lie down and get some rest; it’s very late. We’ll talk some more tomorrow.”

“But...”

“But nothing.” She reluctantly laid down and he pulled the covers up tight around her before leaning over and planting a kiss on her cheek. “I’ll take you to get some ice cream tomorrow, okay?”

“You promise?”

“I do but only if you go to sleep like a big girl.”

“Okay, I will.”

“Good. Sweet dreams.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight angel.”

He rose up from the bed and walked out of the room, picking up his bag of clothes as he left. Jacquelyn turned over and closed her eyes, visions of a triple scoop sundae in her head.

Chapter 6

“Excuse me,” said the man as he walked through the aisle, bumping into Brandon’s arm as it stuck a little out from the armrest.

Brandon looked up to find that the man who had bumped into him was none other than Timothy Columbus. He stood up. “No, excuse me. You’re Timothy Columbus, right?”

It felt good to be recognized. “Yes I am.”

Brandon stuck his hand out and Timothy shook it. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m a big fan of yours. You are what this country needs.”

“Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Sorry, it’s Brandon; Brandon Sullum.”

“Thanks, Brandon, I appreciate the support.”

“You’re welcome. I don’t want to be one of those fans that makes things uncomfortable so I’ll let you get back to your seat.”

“No problem; take care.”

Brandon sat back down, a smile on his face as he watched Timothy take his seat two rows in front of him. This was turning out to be a pretty good day.

Around the office he was known as the Bird Man. He loved to fly – sixty percent of his work week was spent either in the air or in an airport – but, other than times like now when he seen a celebrity, he absolutely detested flying first class; it was against everything that he stood for. He considered himself a man of the people and he liked being around them – the normal everyday people, not sitting up here with these snobs

who would look at you like you had two heads if you told them that you would rather have a chili dog instead of caviar on a stinking cracker.

He had decided a long time ago to stop objecting to the company about their choice of seats for him because they always insisted upon sticking him in first class regardless of the arguments he made against it. It wasn't like he was going to get to Los Angeles any faster if he rode in first class compared to business or coach. He was here now so there was no need to think about it any further as he leaned back in his fine leather seat, loosened his tie, and thought about all the money that they were wasting. He couldn't lie, though, the leather seats were almost worth all the headache that was involved.

"Sir?" asked one of the flight attendants, sneaking up on him and interrupting his day dream. He sat up to find a thin middle-aged woman patiently waiting for him with a pen and a small notebook in her hand. "No thanks..." he glanced at her badge, "...Rochelle, I'm fine."

She nodded and moved on to the next passenger as Brandon started to think about how the upcoming meeting would go. He was good at his job, all modesty aside, and had convinced many reluctant executives before on the benefits of going green but he had a feeling that this company would be a tougher nut to crack. Tough nut or not it all came down to one thing in the end; if you could convince a company that by spending a little money now to become more environmentally friendly that they would make a lot of money in the long run then you were golden.

The plane bobbed up and down as the turbulence continued to get worse. The unsettling motion of the plane caused a few of the passengers, Brandon being one of

them, to grab their armrests with a death grip until it subsided. No matter how much he flew turbulence always got to him.

The pilot's voice came on through the cabin – it was calm unlike the air in which they were flying through. “This is your pilot speaking. I apologize for the rough patches of air in which we've been hitting but I'm quite sure that we have now passed through the worst of it and the remainder of the flight should be smooth sailing. As a precaution I'm going to leave the *Fasten Seatbelts* sign on so please keep your seatbelts on and try to remain seated as much as possible. Thank you and enjoy the rest of your flight.”

Brandon hoped that the pilot was right because he needed as few distractions as possible in order to get himself in the zone to land this deal, one which would guarantee his job and his company's future for the next couple of decades. Reaching down he pulled his laptop from its case under his seat and then cut the power on. After it finally booted up he flipped through the PowerPoint slides of his presentation that were saved on his desktop, rehearsing in his mind the answers to the questions that he anticipated they may ask.

Something happened and, from the way it sounded, it wasn't good. It felt like a shockwave had rocked the plane, beginning in coach and working its way all the way up to first class. The plane shook so violently that it caused Brandon's laptop to fly off his lap and into the aisle where it crashed against the cockpit door. A gasp was elicited from many of the first class passengers while screams could be heard coming from the back of the plane.

Heads swiveled in all directions to try and find out what was going on. Suddenly the oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling and everyone began to put them on but that all

came to a stop when an army of people rushed from the rear of the plane into first class, all looking like they had just seen the Devil in the flesh. Shouts of terror continued from the coach and business class arrivals and most had various amounts of blood on them though not all of it was their own. The first class passengers were awestruck.

One of those dumbfounded first class passengers that sat across from Brandon, a solidly built gentleman named Todd that looked like the type that had some sort of background in the military, stood up and grabbed one of the ladies from the rear of the plane by her shoulder, spinning her around so that he was face to face with her. “What the hell is going on back there?!?!”

She was distraught and sobbing uncontrollably, her mind about to snap and deliver her right to the front door of a nervous breakdown at any moment. “A man...,” she said through her tears, “... there’s a man that came through the plane and he’s killing everyone! Somebody’s gotta stop him or we’re all going to die!!”

Todd’s face lost all color; this wasn’t supposed to be happening he thought to himself. He eased the woman down into the seat that he had been occupying and then looked around for someone to back him up. His eyes landed on Timothy. “I need you right now!”

“I don’t think so,” shot back Timothy as he looked over his seat towards the back of the plane, scared to death. “I report the news not make it.”

“Fucking coward.” He next looked over to Brandon. “You,” he called out, pointing his right index finger at him. “I need you to come with me!!” He bent down and retrieved a gun from the holster that was strapped to his left ankle.

Brandon stood up, his eyes following the gun in Todd's hand. "How did you get that on board?"

"I'm an air marshal, that's how," he explained, stepping into the crowded aisle. "We're about to go find out what the fuck is going on back there. Stay behind me until I tell you otherwise, got it?"

"I gotcha."

"Okay, let's roll."

Brandon followed behind Todd as they began to make their way to the back of the plane. As he stared straight ahead he thought about how for all of his life he had been a coward but now, at this very moment, this was his chance to hit the reset button and become a new man.

They cautiously walked beyond the partition that separated first class from everyone else and they were instantly mortified by what they saw. Bodies were everywhere, some still strapped to their seats with their throats slit or faces bashed in. The floor looked like the Red Sea as blood continued to spill and pool all over the place.

Brandon looked up and was able to see the sky, blue as a robin's egg it was, through a five foot round hole just to the left of the center of the plane. Limbs and body parts, along with paper, cups, and debris were flying up and behind sucked out of the hole like candy from some kind of grotesque piñata. The planes engines were roaring loudly as they tried to stabilize the massive machine.

Todd stopped at the sight of Strader standing in the middle of the aisle, surrounded by the mangled corpses of the passengers and crew that either tried to be courageous and fight or were simply too slow to escape. Two brave men, the last one's left alive, were

trying their best to fight him off and, in the process, were not allowing Todd a clear shot with the gun that he was holding, ready to let shots off. One of the two men had the bottom part of a seat in his hand that had been ripped from the floor of the plane and was using it to strike at Strader while the other man possessed a fire extinguisher which he alternated between hitting and spraying Strader with. Much to the man's dismay the extinguisher ran out of spray and, in the split second that he took to look down at it, Strader pounced on the opportunity, lifting the man up and tearing him in half like a phone book. The fresh blood soaked the inside of the cabin and sprayed into the face of the guy with the chair, causing him to drop it and attempt to clear his vision. Strader grabbed him and threw him through the right side of the plane where he was subsequently sucked through the engine, flames now shooting out of it like a dragon with a bad case of heartburn.

Brandon looked on in fear as Strader now focused on him and Todd, seeing his reflection in his silver eyes. Todd, sensing his opportunity to do something, unloaded on Strader and emptied the entire clip into his hulking body. The shots fired loudly one after the other, the confined space amplifying the noise. BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! Each shot caused Strader to take a step or two back but, no matter what, he refused to go down. The seven holes in him bled for a few seconds before the wounds started to heal and close up.

Strader leaned back and then took a deep breath before letting out a yell that shook the plane; a yell that was fueled by nothing but pure anger. He opened his mouth wide and both Brandon and Todd could see the killing instruments contained within his mouth. He rocketed towards them and Todd tried to brace himself, much like a linebacker

waiting for a running back to bust through the line and hit him, but he was no match for Strader as his sharp claws ripped him to shreds, spilling his entrails onto the ground in a sickening splat.

Brandon, forgetting all about being a hero, turned and attempted to flee but instead slipped in a pool of blood and landed face down on the floor. “Shit!” was the last word he ever spoke before his world turned black. He never saw the hand go in but he could feel his torso being penetrated and the excruciating pain that followed it. His whole body went limp as the last thing his brain registered, before he transitioned to death, was his heart being jerked out of his chest through his back.

Strader held the heart in his massive hands, holding it the same way that someone would hold a Big Mouth-style hamburger, trying to decide where to take the first bite. He proceeded to devour it, needing only two bites to make it disappear. Done with the appetizers he looked towards the front of the plane, realizing that he still had a few more side dishes to sample before he got to the main course. He methodically made his way towards first class, listening to the cries of the passengers, their fear powering the beating of their hearts as they cowered in their seats with nowhere to run.

He stepped through the partition, everyone’s heads whipping around to see who was going to emerge. He relished their fright - it was like a shot of adrenaline to him. You could see it on their faces as they eyed Strader – that *Oh shit!* moment that was engraved on all of their faces. They got up from their seats and ran towards the cockpit, banging furiously on the door. Some got trampled beneath the feet of their fellow passengers, their bodies crushed into bloody pulps; they were the lucky ones. Those that remained felt the

fury of Strader's teeth and claws penetrating their flesh until there was nothing left of them but blood and broken bodies, save for one who had been left unscathed.

Timothy turned around with his back against the cockpit door, his body trembling as Strader walked up to him, kicking bodies out of the way.

"I'm here to deliver a message."

"This is about the Vice President, isn't it? Did he send you to do all of this?"

"That he did. You've gotten yourself into some very deep water and I've been sent to make sure that you drowned."

"We can work this out! On my next show I will retract what I said and offer a complete apology; whatever you want."

"I'm afraid that it's not going to be that simple." He reached out and grabbed Timothy by the jaw and then violently pulled down, ripping the bottom part of it off.

Timothy fell to the ground clutching his face, his hands gripping nothing but muscle, tendons, and gristle.

Strader stepped over him and then took hold of the cockpit door, ripping it away like wrapping paper on a gift. He tossed it backwards, leaving the pilot and co-pilot completely exposed in the cockpit. The co-pilot was communicating with air traffic control on the ground but stopped at the sight of Strader. He attempted to rise up from his seat but a quick swipe from Strader's right hand left him slumped over in his seat with half of his face missing and his blood streaking across the cockpit window. The pilot quickly reached over to his left in the hopes of reaching his pistol – he felt that he would fail but he had to try it regardless. Strader pulled him back and then bit deep into his

neck, the plane banking powerfully to the left as the pilot flopped around in his seat trying to cling to life.

Strader wiped the pilot's blood from his chin and then gazed out of the window, seeing that the plane was heading straight for the side of a mountain. He calmly walked back to the rear of the plane and jumped through the hole he had entered through. Outside he hovered in the air like a bloody angel, watching with fascination as the plane collided into the mountain with a thunderous BOOM, erupting into a massive fireball that warmed Strader's skin and rocked the earth. Mission accomplished.

Chapter 7

The headline was big and bold, screaming out to be read – *Another Terrorist Attack!* Underneath the headline was a black and white image of the smoking debris from the plane crash which served to accentuate the direness of the words above it.

Sitting at the kitchen table and wrapped in a pink robe Amy couldn't believe what she was reading. She took a bite of her toast, wrapped her olive-toned fingers around her mug, and took a long sip of strong black coffee. Setting the mug back down her mind began to race with an infinite number of questions, none of which had any answers. Two apparent terrorist attacks had been committed in less than forty-eight hours and the motivation for them remained unclear. Between the town of Hollis being wiped out and the crash of Flight 365 there were over 3,700 fatalities..., and for what?

*

A small town south of Chicago kept receiving reports of large animals being attacked with their carcasses half eaten and drained of blood. The few that had managed to survive eventually had to be euthanized due to the extensive damage they had suffered. The shredded skin and the depths of the tears were claw-like which led the local authorities to believe that it was some kind of animal which, by the teeth markings, was very strong and vicious with a powerful bite. The assumption was quickly made that the animal was more than likely wild and had somehow been brought into the country illegally and had then escaped or had been let loose after having become too big to take care of. Once it was caught they hoped to be able to find out who and where it had come from.

Three weeks after the first animal assaults the attacks escalated and humans were now being targeted. Prostitutes and homeless people were being picked off and found with the same types of markings as the animals before them but, unlike the animals, no humans were ever found alive. Other people simply went missing, heading out of their house on the way to the store or to the park and never heard from again. The idea of an animal being responsible was dismissed and the focus shifted to someone in the community. The north east section of the town was setup with a strict night time curfew as the attacks had all been confined to that area. Residents were on edge and the police were being pressured to hurry up and solve the case.

Behind the news desk that evening, live on the air with hundreds of thousands of people expecting her to inform them of what was happening, Amy appeared calm but in actuality she was overcome with anxiety. “We’re sorry to interrupt your regularly scheduled programming but we are going to take you out live to the town of Peoria where authorities have surrounded the person they believe to be the perpetrator of the recent human and animal attacks.”

A news helicopter circled high above a red barn, flashing its powerful searchlight at the open door and shedding some much needed light inside. On the ground a SWAT team was setup around the perimeter, four of them approaching the barn with caution while the remaining members anxiously stood guard.

The image on the screen kept going in and out of focus as the news camera adjusted to the light and the movement of the chopper. “It’s hard to see exactly what’s happening on the ground but we do have confirmation now that there is someone inside the barn,” came Amy’s voice as she provided commentary to go with the images.

The four members of SWAT continued their slow approach, flashlights waving as they tried to get a better view. The two leading the charge visually signaled to each other and then entered the barn while their backups stayed by the entrance, guns drawn at the ready.

“If you’re just tuning in we are following the attempted capture of the person believed to be responsible for the death of at least seventeen people and dozens of animals over the last few weeks. This same person is also believed to be connected to the spate of missing people during this same period. SWAT and local members of the police department have setup a perimeter around the building and ... OH MY GOD!”

The image was lost for a second but quickly came back into focus. The camera zoomed in and the sound of shots could be heard coming from the two SWAT members inside of the barn.

“Shots have been fired! Shots have been fired! We’re trying to find out exactly what’s going on down there,” continued Amy.

Amy held her breath at the sight of an albino looking man, naked as the day he was born, sprinting out of the barn. His yell was savage and the sheer speed by which he moved was nothing like a humans. The two members of SWAT that had entered the barn emerged with blood dripping down their face and their guns blazing while the rest of the team started to let off shots as well, the bullets being absorbed into the man’s body.

Acting like a wounded animal the man lashed out at the SWAT team, grabbing the one closest to him and sending him crashing into the side of the SWAT van. The rest couldn’t react quick enough as the man leapt over onto another and ripped out his throat, their shots missing him as he hopped from one to the other, striking each of them with

death blows until they were all on the ground. He looked up at the spotlight that flashed down upon him from the helicopter and winced, holding his right hand up to shield his eyes. Becoming visibly annoyed he picked up one of the dead SWAT members and flung him towards the chopper, hitting the cameraman and coating the lens of the camera with blood. The station quickly cut back to a shot of Amy as she sat stunned, staring blankly ahead.

The next day something was discovered approximately twenty miles from the barn. By the time the press was alerted the scene had been contained and was completely under wraps by the FBI. No one was permitted to see what was under the massive blue tent that had been erected but people had their suspicions about what it was. Watching from the comfort of the newsroom Amy could only shake her head in disbelief. She believed that this was all an attempt by the government to keep the whole event quiet but it didn't stop wild stories from circulating in all of the blogs and tabloid magazines. She knew what she saw and that, whatever it was, it definitely wasn't human; no one could tell her or make her think otherwise.

*

A few months had passed. Amy, like millions of people in America and around the world, had her eyes glued to the television. The President of the United States was about to address the world and the reason for it was unknown. Dignitaries and leaders from most every nation in the world, even those like North Korea that the United States had previously been in conflict with, sat inside the room in a unified front and waited for the President to make his entrance. Whatever it was that he was going to discuss must have been huge as this level of unity was unprecedented.

President Preston Clark appeared looking more like a movie star than a politician. He was fit, trim, and walking with an air of authority like he was the descendant from the Kennedy or Rockefeller clan. Vice President McDonnell accompanied him up the red carpet walkway and then took his spot off to the right as the President stood in front of the bank of microphones. Flash bulbs went off as the President gazed around the room at everyone and gathered his thoughts.

“Good evening,” he started off, his voice clear, concise, and even. “My fellow Americans and friends watching all across this great world of ours, I come to you tonight with a message of great importance that will have a profound effect on each and every one of us. Through extended counsel with members of my administration as well as with leaders across the globe, the majority of which are present here in this room right now, we are here to reveal one of the biggest revelations in all of mankind that, due to measures of national and world security, has been kept secret from you for quite some time. Make no mistake about what I’m about to tell you – we are about to cross a threshold, one that will never be the same afterwards; after tonight we will no longer be able to put the genie back into the bottle. I’m telling you this not only as the President of the United States but, most importantly, as a member of the human race.”

The world essentially came to a standstill as the words from the President captured everyone’s attention, especially the part about being a member of the human race. The phrase sounded so awkward coming out of his mouth. Of course he was a member of the human race – what other race could there be? They continued to listen, hanging on his every word.

The President took a quick sip from the bottle of water that was tucked away inside the podium before he continued. “The last month or so has been trying and have provided me with many sleepless nights. I know that you’ve been asking yourself if there any truths to all of the reports concerning what has been labeled as inhuman activity by certain members of the press. I’m here to tell you that, as a matter of fact, the reports are true; we are not alone.” He paused to allow his words to sink in. “I’m now going to turn this over to one of my closest friends, Vice President McDonnell, who has a little more insight on the issue.”

The President took a few steps to his right and out of the view of the camera as Vice President McDonnell took his place behind the podium, staring directly into the camera as flash bulbs once again went off. There was to be no playing around with him – he was ready to get right down to business. “The President has spoken very well of mankind and from what I have observed over my many years I can wholeheartedly second those statements.” He shifted nervously behind the podium before leaning forward, his hands together and fingers joined. “As I stand here addressing you I’m doing so not only as the Vice President...,” he paused and exhaled, “... but also as the leader of the Vampire Nation.”

Everyone in the room and all those listening and watching across the world – every race, gender, ethnicity, and religion – fell silent at McDonnell’s words. Was he serious? People turned and looked in awe at their neighbors, wondering if this was some kind of elaborate joke. If it was a joke the punch line never came.

“Yes, vampires are real but we should not be feared by humans,” he continued. “We have quietly lived amongst you for quiet some time now. As vampires we have always

known that this day would eventually come and, as such, we took measures that we felt and hoped would get the idea of having us residing side by side with you a little easier to accept and wrap your minds around. At the same time we understand that this is not going to be something that will happen overnight; these things will take time just as it has taken time for the likes of African Americans and homosexuals to be accepted into mainstream society. This is something that we have anticipated and are prepared to work at on our end for the greater good of both us and humans.

“It is hardly a coincidence that the mythology and romanticizing of vampires has been able to survive for so long with never having a significant dip in our popularity. In films, books, television, video games, graphic novels, and every other form of media, stories involving vampires have hands down been the most dominant of any subject. This is not to say that it has only been vampires who have been the purveyors of these stories as there have been plenty of humans who have taken the stories we’ve put out to the masses and used them to create fascinating tales that have only helped to propel our image. With our popularity being at an all time high and due to the events that have unfolded over the last month, of which I will go into further detail shortly, it has let us know that now is the time to make ourselves known to the world.

“The history of vampires is a long and proud one. For roughly five thousand years we have been here and for most of that time the relationship between humans and vampires has been an advantageous one for us but, just as humans have evolved from apes we, too, have taken the next step in the process and have evolved from humans. Was there a time when we looked upon humans as a source of food? The answer to that question is yes but that should be looked at no differently than what humans currently do

today with the likes of cows, chickens, deer, etc..., etc... As we vampires have continued to evolve, it has no longer become necessary for us to need the blood of humans; we are now more than capable of surviving just as you do so you do not need to have the thought or fear in your mind that vampires will one day revert back to our old ways. With that in mind I would now like to address the incident that really provided the catalyst for this announcement.

“Before I begin I would like to preface what I’m about to say by stating that we vampires are just like you. What I mean by that is just like humans there are a good number of us and, no matter the best intentions that we as a race or group of people may have, there are always going to be a few sheep in the flock that shame their family and reflect poorly on the group as a whole. Having said that I encourage you to try and not let past transgressions serve to negatively cloud your mind on a whole race of people that want nothing more than to live outside of the shadows and fringe of society as we have had to do for as long as we’ve existed on this earth. Getting back to the catalyst that I spoke of earlier, the sheep that strayed from our flock – the very one that you have seen countless times on television, online, and splashed across the papers – was named Emanuel Brea. This rogue element of our society, who we most certainly believe to have been working alone, is now deceased as some of you may have already speculated. I will not discuss the exact nature of his death but I will assure each and every one of you that the situation was taken care of internally and that we do not expect to have any more disturbances of this magnitude again.

“Like the President mentioned before, now is the time for acceptance and not just by humans but also by vampires as well. Both groups must be diligent and realize that we

are walking a very high tightrope together and if we do not support and uphold each other then all of us will fall and I fear what lies at the bottom will be far worse than any of us can imagine. I've said this before but it bears repeating – we're not the enemy; we are just like you. Thank you and good night.”

The President and Vice President walked side by side out of the room and away from the flashing cameras and calls from the reporters with their millions of questions that, for now, would go unanswered. The world was left to reel from this event and, just like the President said, it would never be the same again.

*

Amy had one of the best seats in the world as five days a week over the next five years she got to sit behind her news desk and deliver all of the news that concerned the gelling of humans and vampires into one functioning society. Everyone was understandably cautious and the world moved with the speed of baby steps.

As was to be expected, the first year was the worst. There seemed to be a new protest sparking up everyday, most of them peaceful, but some turning violent. It was like the Civil Rights Movement all over again, but ten times worse. There was so much hatred and venom being spewed forth, all of it based on nothing but fear.

The world was divided straight down the middle in their opinion on how to deal with vampires and that extended all the way up to the highest levels of government as well. The United States was quick to act, spending hundreds of millions of dollars to create super-enforced prisons that exclusively housed vampires as the prospect of housing vampires with humans was deemed an unnecessary risk. Changes were made to existing laws and, in many cases, new laws had to be written as some of the existing laws

for humans did not pertain at all to vampires. The rights that vampires could and could not have were major hot button issues and vampires were afforded some, but not all, of the rights that humans possessed. It became illegal to discriminate in any way when it came down to hiring practices, purchasing a home, medical care, etc..., etc... The right to vote and the recognizing of marriage involving vampires, be it between two vampires or between a vampire and a human, was not recognized, though.

Since no one, not even their leaders, knew exactly how many vampires there were in the world – some put the estimates as low as 15,000 and as high as 55,000 – the death penalty was created as a deterrent for vampires who were convicted of turning a human into a vampire. No appeal or pardon was to be given, instead the vampire's body would be submerged in acid until it was completely eradicated. Leaders of the Vampire Nation, including the Vice President, were at odds with the President over this but it was something that he refused to budge on.

There were some in the House and Senate that wanted either a database to be kept on all vampires or to have them branded with some sort of visible symbol so as to let everyone know who was and wasn't a vampire. The President swiftly vetoed those measures as he believed that going to that extreme would cause more problems than solutions. In his mind he wondered what would have been the next step had either of those measures been allowed to pass: confining all vampires into concentration camps like Hitler did to the Jews? President Clark was not going to let that happen on his watch.

This was the biggest gamble of President Clark's political life. He was playing a game of Russian roulette regarding his stance on vampires but in his heart he felt that he

was doing the right thing. Everything that happened, be it good or bad, fell back on the President's shoulders and it was a tough load to carry.

The world went on as it normally did, at least the new version of normalcy that came with the presence of vampires. Until recently things had been okay but all that was about to change.

Chapter 8

Tina Macintosh stood at the large floor to ceiling window in her corner office high above the city, looking down at a picture of Jessica that she held in her hand. She looked up from it and stared out at the city, seeing nothing and everything at the same time. She looked virtually unchanged over the last five years other than a few grey hairs and a look of sadness that no amount of botox or plastic surgery could fix. The sound of her secretary over the intercom brought her back to reality.

“Ms. Macintosh there’s a Mr. Trainor on line 2.”

Tina paused, wondering and praying if the head of the FBI had word of her daughter. “I’ll take it. Thanks, Jasmine.

She sat down at her desk and picked up the phone. “This is Tina Macintosh, how can I help you, Mr. Trainor?” There was a pause as she listened. “Yes, this is a secure line.” Pause. “He is? I thought that everyone had been killed.” Pause. “When can I see him?” Pause. “I understand – this will remain confidential. Thank you.”

She slowly hung the phone up and set the picture of Jessica down.

“Ms. Macintosh?”

“Yes Jasmine, what is it?”

“Sorry to bother you again. You told me to let you know when Mr. Rider arrived; he’s here.”

“Send him in please.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The door opened and in stepped a tall gentleman with oily hair and a briefcase in his hand. Ms. Macintosh rose to greet him. “Good afternoon, Mr. Rider. I understand that you have finally been able to find the information that I’ve been waiting for.”

“Yes I was.”

They both sat down.

“Well?”

“Since you upped the reward to \$25,000,000 there has been a ten fold increase in the number of leads. I was skeptical of anything really coming from them considering that it’s been almost 5 years since she disappeared.”

“Let’s skip the bullshit Rider, shall we? You say you have information and I’m smart enough to know that if she were alive then you would have her here right now but, since she’s not, I assume that you have information stating other wise. I have made peace with her not possibly coming back years ago so tell me how and who did it.”

“Of course Ms. Macintosh, I’m sorry. I was given this.” He opened up the briefcase and pulled out a sealed plastic bag that contained several small bone fragments which he handed over to her. “We were able to run a DNA analysis comparing the DNA from these pieces of bone to the samples that you gave us and they are a match.”

She set the bag down on her desk. “And you’re 100% sure about this?”

“Sure enough to be here.”

“I see.” She turned in her chair and stared out the window once more. “Who killed my daughter, Rider?”

“I was not told who exactly did it but I know where it happened. There’s something you should know.”

“And what would that be?”

“It was vampires. Apparently they ate...”

“That’s enough!” she stopped him as she turned back around, her whole body on fire with rage. “I need all the information that you have.”

“Of course,” he said as he pulled out a folder crammed with papers and slid it over to her. “Everything you need to know is in here.”

“It better be.” She reached into her desk and pulled out her checkbook. Using a pen she wrote out two checks, one for \$25,000,000 and the other for \$10,000,000. “Make sure the person that gave you the fragments gets the reward and the other is your fee. You’ve done well.

He took the checks and stuffed them in his coat pocket. “Thank you.”

“Leave me now; I’ve got some things to think about.”

“Sure thing. By the way, for what it’s worth, my condolences.”

She gave him a cold smile and he made a hasty retreat out of the office. Once he was gone she got Jasmine on the phone.

“Yes ma’am?”

“I need you to get General Freedman on the phone.”

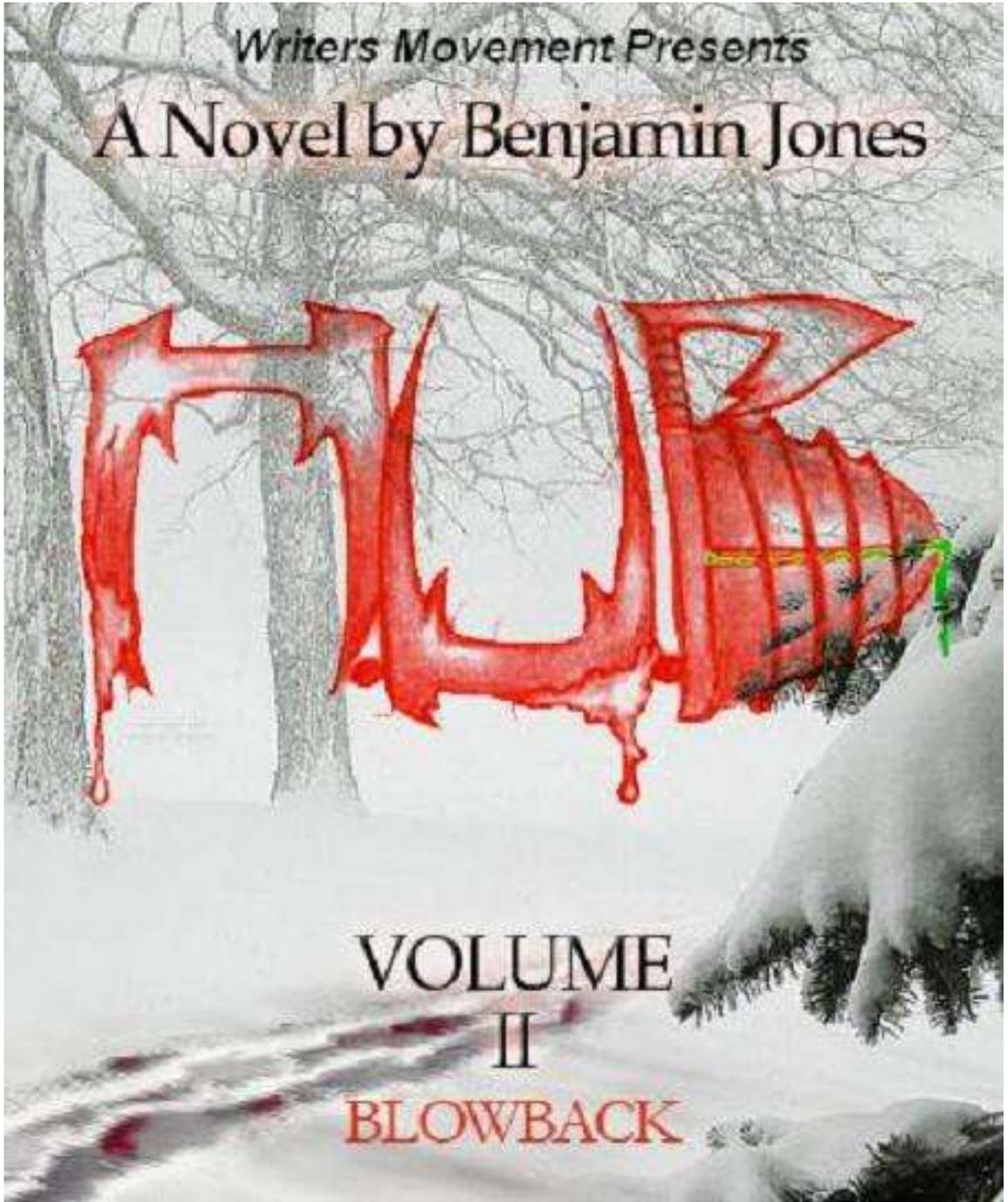
Writers Movement Presents

A Novel by Benjamin Jones

HOLY

VOLUME
II

BLOWBACK



Chapter 1

Moscow, Russia

The three beefy bodyguards, two in the front and one in the rear, escorted Tina Macintosh through the bustling restaurant. The four of them walked in silence, entering the kitchen area, on through a set of double doors, down a flight of stairs into a long hallway that was dimly lit with bulbs that flickered on and off seemingly at random.

There were small rooms along each side of the hallway, a total of about sixteen in all, and each one of them with a posted guard posted up by their doors. Tina glanced into one of the rooms to see an elderly gentleman in his late fifties lying naked on top of an equally naked young girl who looked to be no older than thirteen, giving her the unholy business. The girl happened to look up and lock tear-filled eyes on Tina as she passed through. Tina, heartbroken but refusing to show it, broke eye contact and kept moving, her face one of stone as usual.

They came to the end of the hallway which dead-ended into a large set of French doors that two gargantuan sized men, assault rifles at the ready, stood guard over. The two Russian behemoths tensed up at the sight of Tina even with three of their own men leading her to them.

“Out of the way, the boss has a guest,” spoke one of the two guards in the front.

“I must check for any weapons,” shot back the sentry on the left as he eyed Tina with lustful eyes. “She may wish to harm the boss.”

“We’ve already searched her,” replied her escort.

“I’ll search her anyway.”

He passed his weapon over to his pal and then stepped towards Tina. “Briefcase down and hands up.” Tina placed her black metal briefcase on the floor and then raised her hands.

“Good girl.” He began patting her down, checking all the usual areas but then running his hand across the crotch of her pants suit and then fondling both of her breasts for good measure. His partner laughed like a school boy while Tina looked him in the eye as he continued to feel her up. “I need you to open the briefcase.”

“The contents of that briefcase are none of your concern,” she answered back sharply as she lowered her hands.

“Maybe I’ll open it for myself and see.”

“You can try but all the brawn in the world won’t get it to open and you don’t look like the type that has a lot of brain power so I’m not betting on you succeeding.”

The four men laughed at him, pissing him off even more. He got nose to nose with her, close enough for her to taste the vodka on his breath. “I’ve done a lot of bad things to women just like you.”

“You’ve never met a woman like me. Are we done here? I don’t think Mr. Horrobin will appreciate you wasting his time.”

He backed up, knowing that she was right. He stepped over to the door and opened it.

Tina picked up her briefcase and followed her escorts into the room which was like a casino with card tables, slot machines, and an assortment of well dressed Russian gentleman enjoying the festivities. Cigar smoke was thick in here and the sounds of the

slot machines and their constant jingling assaulted the ears. They made a right and walked through the gaming area to where an office was located.

The two men stopped in front of the door, the one on the left pulling out a walkie-talkie. "Ms. Macintosh is here. We're right outside your office."

"Send her in," replied the person on the other end, his thick Russian accent spilling out through the small speaker on the radio..

He opened the door and Tina entered the office, her eyes immediately landing upon the boss named Horrobin Bezuvin as he sat at his desk, which had a plate of cocaine sitting upon it as well as a burning stogie. Horrobin had his shirt unbuttoned, exposing his heavily tattooed barrel of a chest, and his pants were unzipped as two topless women sat on their knees pleasuring him with their mouths and hands.

As Tina entered, Horrobin lifted his head and smiled at her. "Ms. Macintosh, I've been dying to meet you." He looked down at the two women that were sucking him off. "Leave me."

They got off their knees and quickly exited the room. Tina looked at their hollow eyes and drugged up faces, feeling sorry for them. "Afternoon, Mr. Bezuvin," she greeted him, "have I caught you at a bad time?"

"Of course not," he answered as he stood up and stuffed himself back in his pants, "that is my way of relieving stress." He looked over at the three escorts and shooed them away with a wave of his left hand. They exited the room and shut the door, leaving the two of them alone. "Please have a seat."

Tina sat down, placing the briefcase down between her feet. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said as he took his seat. “It’s not everyday that I get to meet with someone of your caliber. I must admit, I’m surprised that you wanted to meet me. A woman of your stature, especially from America, usually doesn’t come here to my office in person.”

“I’m a very hands on type of person, Mr. Bezuvin, and, from what I’ve learned from my research, so are you.”

He smiled, smitten by her. “I like you. I can tell that you are going to be a LOT of fun.” He nodded over to the plate of coke. “Would you like some? Purest you will ever find in Russia.”

“No thank you.”

“Suit yourself. Your assistant was very brief and cryptic on the phone so I really don’t know what it is that you could possibly want or need from me. Would you care to explain?”

“I apologize for the shortness of the call, but you have to understand that it could lead to a whole lot of unnecessary and uncomfortable questions being asked if the wrong people were to ever find out that I was meeting with the leader of the Solntseiskaya Bratva. Many in my country and around the world consider your group to be one of the most powerful organized crime associations in the world.”

“And what do you think?”

“It really doesn’t matter what I think but, if you must know, and if we are being completely honest with each other, I can’t say that I approve of all of your alleged activities: money laundering, pornography, prostitution, tax evasion, wire fraud, drug trafficking, arson, art theft, and the list goes on and on. I could sit here and judge you but

that's not why I'm here. There are enough people in the world that look at me the same way considering that the weapons my company creates have been used to kill millions of people all over the world."

"I appreciate your honesty, Ms. Macintosh. Shall we get down to business?"

"Of course. I was informed that you share the same disdain of vampires that I do. I also know that it was your people that were responsible for the March 29, 2010 bombing that ripped through this city's metro system. It was portrayed in the media as a simple act of terrorism blamed on radical Islamists but I know that that's not the case. It was done because you got wind of a large group of vampires were going to be on those routes so you decided to take them out."

"Filthy creatures they are," he said, his face full of disgust. "I remember seeing your news conference a few years ago – you think that they killed your daughter."

"I don't think, I know. Vampires are like locusts, consuming everything in their path and they must be destroyed or else the entire human population will be wiped out."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I deal in the business of weapons and war so I can feel when one is brewing. I'm putting together a team to take them out."

He let out a hearty laugh. "A team you say? How are you going to wipe out a whole race of vampires with only a 'team'?"

"The team I'm putting together is going to lead the army that is going to fight the vampires."

"An army? Are you referring to the United States military?"

“That’s precisely who I’m referring to. I’m pretty sure you’ve been following the presidential debates, correct?”

“Of course.”

“Then you know that General Freedman pretty much has it in the bag. Who do you think has been secretly financing his campaign?”“You?”

“Yes, to the extent of \$60,000,000.”

“And what’s in it for you if he wins?”

“Revenge.”

He smiled. “What part do I play in this?”

“I’m glad that you asked.” She picked the briefcase up and set it on the desk. She typed in a code on the panel and then stuck her finger on the biometric display, after which the briefcase opened. She pulled out a picture of a bald headed Russian with ice blue eyes. “This is your man, correct?”

He took the picture and looked it over. “Yes, his name is...”

“Valera Abramov,” she answered for him, “and he’s known as the ‘phantom’; he’s your top enforcer, responsible for what some have pegged as up to three hundred contract killings. I want to lease him from you.”

He set the picture down. “How much?”

“I know that you have everything that you could ever want so I’m not going to insult you by offering you money. So, here’s what I can offer you.” She pulled two pictures out of the briefcase and sat them down face up on the desk. The first was of an older woman that was lying in a hospital bed with an oxygen mask strapped to her face. The second was a photo of a skinny kid with shaggy hair and scared eyes.

“Where did you get these pictures? How do you know about my family?”

“I have a lot of money and, due to that, I have a lot of friends and I’m very thorough when I research the people I’m going to be dealing with. Your brother Dima is being held in a military prison that’s off the grid – I can get him released. Your mother in America is dying of cancer and doesn’t have long to live. You can’t go to see her because you’re considered a terrorist and can’t enter the country and, unfortunately for you, she is way too sick to make the trip here. Give me Valera and Dima is set free and I’ll see to it that, by placing one phone call, you will once again be able to set foot on American soil and see your ailing mother again. Do we have a deal?”

He rubbed his chin. “You make a very compelling offer. How do I know that I can trust you?” “Do you really have to ask me that, Mr. Bezuvin?”

A smile crossed his face. “Of course not. I must see my mother first before we have a deal.” “I can manage that. There is one other thing, though.”

“And what would that be?”

“I have it from a good source that you’ve been known to illegally trade nuclear materials; I’m going to need some.”

“Ms. Macintosh, you get me to America to see my mother and free my brother then you can have anything that you like.”

She stuck her hand out and shook his hand. “Excellent.”

Chapter 2

Two in the morning on a Tuesday night and the highway was deserted which was to be expected at this time of night on a weekday. With no traffic to slow it down the black limousine barreled down the road like a rocket shot straight from the bowels of Hell, it's silver headlights slicing through the charcoal darkness of the night.

Inside the car, surrounded by several layers of tinted bulletproof glass and reinforced steel, Malachi relaxed in style, his \$10,000 suit fitting him like butter on a hot biscuit. With closed eyes, the partition raised to separate himself from the prying eyes and ears of his driver, he quietly hummed a song to himself while he maneuvered a silver dollar across the knuckles of his right hand; the coin moved through his fingers as smoothly as an oiled snake on an air hockey table. His forked tongue slipped out of his mouth and over his lips as he continued to think.

His eyes opened and he flipped the coin into the air, catching it with his right hand and placing it over on the back of his left hand, his right hand concealing the coin so that he couldn't see what side it had landed on. "Heads," he called out to himself and then uncovered the coin – heads it was.

Reaching into the inside pocket of his suit jacket he deposited the dollar into it and pulled his iPhone out. He pressed an icon on the touch screen and a map of the world popped up with red pulsating dots on various cities around the world. He slid his finger to the right on the screen, the map moving over to mimic his finger. He tapped on the display and the country of Japan came into focus, its red dot flashing like a beacon.

He set the phone down beside him and then leaned forward, pushing one of the many buttons in the middle of the console.

“Yes sir, what can I get for you?” asked the driver.

“Change of plans; I have a taste for sushi.”

“Your usual spot?”

“Yes.”

“Red Room it is then.”

“Thank you.”

Malachi rested back against the fine leather seat and picked his phone back up, the claws on his hand punching in a few numbers.

“Yes, my love?” was the greeting he received after only one ring.

Her voice always brought a smile to his face. “My dearest, Angoria. It is time to implement the Orient Initiative that we had discussed. Brief Kanice and make sure that she understands what needs to happen. I want her on the next flight out so prepare all the necessary documents and cash that she will need. I will inform Price so that he will have a team assembled and ready to deploy.”

“Why send Kanice when Price has many capable members to lead the operation?”

“You know how I am; I don’t like anything to go down without either myself or one of our people taking the lead. Given Kanice’s background it is only natural for her to be the point man on this one.”

“I understand. When will you be arriving?”

“Soon. I have a stop to make first. I’ll bring you back something.” “Thank you. I will see you later.”

The phone call ended and he immediately dialed another number. There was only silence on the other end when it was answered. “Kyoto is a go,” spoke Malachi. “Have your team assembled. It’s time to lay down a warning to the rest of the world. Kanice will be arriving within the next forty-eight hours; she’ll know what to do.”

He hung the phone up and then inhaled deeply through his nose, his chest puffing out and then deflating when he exhaled. It felt good to be the king.

Chapter 3

Kyoto, Japan

It was the third straight day of heavy snowfall and the outside world was coated in it – every tree, light post, street, power line, rooftop, and car that had the unfortunate luck of being left outside was dusted in a thick layer of powder.

Dressed in fur-lined gloves, a thick black winter coat, and a tight fitting skullcap to keep his head and ears from the elements, nineteen year old Mikhoro liked, you could even say that he preferred, this type of weather. He carried a plastic sack of groceries in his left hand while holding an iPod in his right, the sounds of good ol' American music – Kanye West to be exact – filling up his ears. The cold temperature made it look like smoke was billowing out of his mouth as he rapped along word for word with the Chicago bred emcee. As he walked through the neighborhood, his eyes focused only on the sidewalk that stretched out before him and his ears absorbing only the tunes blasting from his mp3 player, he was both blind and deaf to everything that began to happen behind him.

Out of the sky flew four vampires, one crashing into a market and the others crashing into the rooftops of three nearby houses, sending snow, wood, and debris flying into the air.

The manager of the market, a wrinkled little man with blood spilling freely from his forehead, which he attempted to stop by placing his right hand over the wound, stumbled through what was left of the store's doorway. He collapsed to one knee and then righted himself, a big wet and bloody cough erupting from his chest as he took a step forward but was then pulled back inside the confines of the store by two lean but very strong arms.

A young woman, blood rushing from the mangled mess of what used to be her throat, ran from her home with what appeared to be a silent and unmoving baby wrapped in a blood soaked blanket, collapsing into the yard, her blood turning the virgin snow a deep burgundy. She continued to hold on to the mortally wounded baby, her blood dripping onto it and, with what little of the dwindling energy that she had left, turned and caught sight of Mikhoros as he nodded his head up and down to the music. She weakly raised her left arm, only able to lift it about half way up, and tried to signal Mikhoros but only gargled sounds came from her mouth.

As she continued to try and call out for help Kanice stepped out of the house and slowly walked towards the doomed woman, circling her like a vulture patiently waiting for its prey to perish. As she struggled to crawl away Kanice lifted her right leg up and brought it down with the weight of a hammer being swung by the mighty Thor, crushing the unfortunate woman's head like a grape.

Mikhoros stopped and paused the iPod, right between songs, and his ears picked up the sound of the woman's poor head being pulverized – the sickening squash stopping him in his tracks. He slowly turned around, his eyes first catching sight of the lady's blood and brain matter racing from her head almost as if in competition to see which one could escape first. His eyes moved further up to see Kanice and the alarming look on her face. Her mercury colored eyes caused him to drop both the bag and his iPod to the ground and take off running, his lungs feeling like they were on fire as he ran full speed the five blocks towards his house, refusing to look back.

Kanice smiled, her eyes following him as he ran. She casually walked after him, stalking him like Jason Voorhees does teenagers at Camp Crystal Lake. Meanwhile her three associates continued their rampage, fires now raging as they left their mark.

Mikhorō, heart hammering inside his chest, threw open the door to his house and then slammed it shut, making sure to secure all three of the locks though he wasn't sure what protection they would really provide. Perspiration streamed down his face as he turned around and screamed out "Dad!!!!" He ran down the hallway and into the kitchen where his father and sister were busy preparing the table for a meal.

"Why are you yelling like a madman?" He noticed the sweat and the wild eyed look on Mikhorō's face. "What's going on, son? What happened to the food that I sent you to get?"

"Silver eyes are coming!"

Both his father and sister dropped their plates to the floor, needing to hear nothing else from him to understand the gravity of the situation. Pops reached under the kitchen table and withdrew a large, shiny, and, most importantly, super sharp samurai sword which had been concealed underneath it. He tossed it over to Mikhorō who caught it by the handle and he then made his way over to the sink, opening the cabinet and retrieving a sawed-off shotgun from behind all of the cleaning products.

He held the gun in his right hand as he took hold of his daughter's hand with the other. "You know the drill; we're going to head down to the safe room in the basement." He looked down at his young daughter. "Hana, you stay in the middle between Mikhorō and me; do not let go of my hand, understand?"

She nodded her head up and down. "I'm scared."

“Don’t be,” countered dad, “we’re going to be fine. Let’s go.”

They took a few steps forward, Hana sandwiched between her father and brother as they made their way towards the safety of the basement. A deafening crash stopped their momentum as an explosion of dust and wood rained down upon them.

In the middle of the dust cloud stood Echo, a vampire that resembled Lucy Liu, blood dripping from the claws on her hand, as well as from the fangs in her mouth, as she stood blocking their path, staring at the three of them with a look of pure rage on her face.

Pops raised the shotgun and blasted her square in the chest with no hesitation, sending her flying backwards and landing beside the stairs that led down to the basement, blood oozing from her wounds. He turned and faced his children, addressing Mikhorō specifically. “Change of plans - take your sister to the attic and hide until I tell you its safe.”

“But dad...,” cried out Hana.

“But nothing,” he interrupted her. “Everything is going to be fine. Go with your brother now.”

“Dad, watch out!!” screamed Mikhorō, pointing at something behind his father.

Dad turned and was confronted by Echo who was back standing on her feet. She leapt on him, knocking him to the floor and lying on top of him as he tried to fight her off, raining a few brutal right hands to her face before grabbing her arms to try to keep her claws from reaching him. “GO!!!!”

As his strength began to fail him, she was able to get the upper hand, snapping both of his arms in half, bone poking from out from the jagged tears in his skin, and then dove in taking a lethal bite out of his neck.

Mikhoru scooped up the screaming Hana and headed towards the stairs. He came to an abrupt stop when he saw a large hole in the stairway that prevented them from crossing.

“Why are you stopping?” she asked, looking behind for signs of Echo.

“I can’t jump across with you and I don’t think that you’ll be able to make it on your own; I’m gonna have to throw you across.” He set her down and got down on his knees so that he was face to face with her. “As soon as you hit the ground you pull those stairs down and head up to the attic and bolt the door. Don’t open it unless I give you the secret knock. You remember the secret knock, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” He picked her up. “On three: one, two, three!” He tossed her into the air, watching as she flew towards the other side. His look turned into one of horror as he was helpless to do anything but look on as a hand reached up from the hole in the stairs and snatched Hana by her left leg, pulling her screaming body back down to the kitchen area.

“Hana!!!”

He looked into the hole, seeing his sister being swarmed over by Echo. He rose up and took four steps back before taking off and vaulting over the hole to the other side. He performed a roll as he landed and then dashed up the stairs to the attic, pulling the attic stairs up as he entered the room and using a dead bolt to lock the door. He quickly backed up, stumbled, then caught himself, and braced his body by standing with his back against the wall. He bent over and took a few deep breaths, the sword held tightly in his hand with a death grip.

He gazed out the window as the snow continued to fall upon the city that was quickly becoming a wasteland as thick black smoke rose towards the heavens from the mango orange fires that consumed the businesses and houses below. The floor shook beneath his feet, causing him to look back. Another blow landed, the force causing the wooden floor to splinter and crack. The shots started to come quicker and with more force, prompting him into action.

Briefly setting the sword down, but not too far from his reach, he forced the attic window open and stepped onto the narrow ledge that led to the roof. Reaching back inside for the sword he momentarily hesitated as Echo shot up through the floor and landed inside the attic. Her eyes instantly found him as he grabbed the sword and then disappeared around the edge of the wall.

Maneuvering gingerly across the snow covered ledge to the rooftop he observed Echo as she glided out of the window and came to a rest on the roof, standing directly across from him with a deranged look on her face. She looked much like a mental patient that has been holding a grudge against someone and now had the opportunity to retaliate.

Kanice stood watching from street level, her eyes staring intently like a teacher checking out their young mentor on their first assignment. Mikhoru looked down at her and then back at Echo. He exhaled and then held his sword out in front of him, ready to dance.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” Echo taunted him as she circled around, moving in herky-jerky movements while her tongue flicked wildly out of her mouth.

Mikhoru navigated around the roof, keeping his distance between her as his feet crunched upon the snow. He remained calm, breathing normally, though his heart was

racing triple time. He glanced down at Kanice again. “I assume that you’re the one in charge,” he called down to her. “I want to make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” she answered back. “There’s nothing that you can possibly give or do for us.”

“A simple one – if I kill her then you let me live.”

“What do you think about that proposition, Echo? I’ll let you make the call.”

She let out a wicked laugh, her hands on her belly. “I’m going to eat him alive. I accept the challenge.”

“So do we have a deal?” he asked Kanice.

“Yes, we have a deal. If you can kill Echo then I will spare your life.”

“Give me your word.”

“You have my word.”

“Okay,” he said softly to himself, “let’s do this.”

Echo lunged at him, claws swinging wildly and colliding with the steel of his sword, sending sparks flying into the air to mix with the falling snow. He swung his sword like Conan but Echo easily avoided it, using her superior speed to sidestep out of the way. Feeling like Neo must have felt the first time he fought the Agents in *The Matrix* he steadied himself and regrouped.

“You don’t stand a chance,” she taunted him again, a jackal’s sneer on her face.

He said nothing in return, only watching as he plotted his next move. Looking into her face he realized just how pretty she was and that deeply saddened him. So beautiful and elegant looking – the type he would have liked to have possibly dated if given the chance – but there was nothing more than a carnivorous monster lurking beneath that

pasty mask of hers, one that he would need to find a way to kill or end up being her next victim.

Trying to gain a bit of traction on the slippery ice and snow he dashed towards her, ready to impale his sword deep into her body. She continued to block his every strike with her claws, smoke and sparks flying like flint being struck by metal. No matter what he tried he couldn't find a clear opening.

Sensing an opening of her own Echo swung her right hand at Mikhorō's neck, attempting to sever his head from his body but she miscalculated, the momentum of her swing causing her to briefly lose her footing on the ice.

Mikoro ducked under her flailing arm and then rose up, driving the sword deep into the left side of her chest. Upon striking the place where her heart would be the sword shattered into dozens of pieces, leaving only half of the blade left in his hand. He stared in astonishment at what was left of his weapon and then at Echo as she rose to her feet, the vilest of smiles upon her face as her chest wound started to close up.

"I can bet that you weren't expecting that," she said as she reached down and pulled out the little bit of metal that remained lodged in her chest and then threw it aside. Quick as lightning she extended her left hand and sliced Mikhorō across the stomach, her rock hard claws sliding effortlessly through his stomach muscles and causing five stripes of blood to appear which quickly darkened his blue shirt and dripped onto the ground.

Mikhorō fell forward, clutching his burning wound with his left hand while using the sword in his other hand to keep himself righted. Wincing in pain and with forced breathing he stood up straight and held what left of the sword out in front of him again.

Echo licked his blood from her claws. “Your blood is delicious; I can’t wait to eat your heart. I’m going to enjoy making you suffer.”

He exhaled deeply and then closed his eyes for a second. He opened them and was ready to go at it again. “Let’s go.”

Echo rushed him at which point he threw the remains of his sword at her head, the metal gleaming in the air as it turned over and over before landing squarely in her right eye. Stunned and screaming in pain she stopped her advance, giving Mikhoro the opening he needed.

As she went to pull the sword out Mikhoro used his last bit of energy and executed a roundhouse kick to her face, blood gushing out of it like water from a busted water balloon, coating the snow with a thick spray of blood. As she stumbled backwards he ran up and pulled the sword from her eye socket and, with one quick slice, drew the blade across her throat, decapitating her. Her head flew backwards and rolled on the ground while the rest of her body fell forward, landing on her knees and then collapsing flat in front of Mikhoro, her blood splashing onto his sneakers.

As her body fell over he caught a glimpse of Hana as she crawled onto the rooftop, blood soaking her clothes. “Hana!!!!” he called out, dropping the sword to the ground and limping towards her. His energy gave out half way to her and he fell to the ground, inching the rest of the way to her on his belly and leaving a widening trail of blood on the rooftop.

“Hana,” he said softly as he arrived at her body which was lying face down. Mustering his strength he got to his knees and rolled her over onto her back, wiping

clumps of red snowflakes from her delicate face. Her closed eyes brought a lump to his throat and brought his worst fears front and center.

Cradling her in his arms he looked down at her face and it was then that her eyes popped open, no longer were they caramel colored but were now fully silver, and she swiftly sat up and grabbed a hold of his hair, sinking her new fangs into his neck.

*

5 Weeks Later

Eastern Kyoto

Walking along the cherry tree lined Philosopher's Path, Ms. Kadukawa, an older woman with pursed lips, salt and pepper hair, and an air of unquestionable authority about herself, led her quiet and well behaved class of fifteen students as they walked in a straight line. All of the young children carried brown sack lunches in their hand and they all wore white stickers on the shirts of their matching uniforms that listed their first name on it and the initials KVE in big bold black letters below. A younger woman, Ms. Kadukawa's assistant by the name of Mrs. Saito, brought up the rear of the line to make sure that none of the children strayed away from the group, though the chances of that happening were very remote.

Ms. Kadukawa came to a stop and pointed over to some white flowers. "Easy question class: who can tell me what these are?"

"Cherry blossoms," answered the group in a high pitched collection of voices.

"That is correct. We are fortunate enough to live in the best place in the country to view these beautiful flowers. Let's continue on."

They walked through the garden of the Heian Shrine, which was not far from the Philosopher's Path, and featured colorful pink blossoms that were a wonderful contrast to the white ones that they had just seen. Several vendors selling a variety of foods and souvenirs lined the streets including a man dressed as a clown that was making balloon animals for the kids that happened to pass by.

"Hello children," he greeted the group as they approached, his delightful voice and painted face exciting the kids. Ms. Kadukawa and the children stopped in front of him. "Say hello children," she instructed them.

The children greeted him back.

"Are you on a field trip?"

"Yeah," they all replied.

"I wish that I could go on a field trip. Would you guys and gals like a balloon?"

"Yeah!" they answered again, more enthusiastically this time.

"You'll have to ask your teacher if it's okay first."

They looked up at Ms. Kadukawa, each of them with big puppy dog eyes. There was no way that she could say no. She nodded her head yes.

"Alright then. What would you like, darling?"

The shy little cutie in front of him blushed. "A puppy."

"I can do that." He pulled a purple balloon from the pile and started working his magic. "You guys like school?"

An assortment of answers was thrown back his way, all a different variation of yes.

"That's good. I see the KVE on your stickers; that stands for Kyoto Vampire Elementary, right?"

“Yep,” answered a mischievous looking boy in the front row.

The clown handed the puppy shaped balloon to the little girl. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I hear that KVE is an excellent school and it must be to have such nice kids like you in it. Because you’re so nice and well mannered I have a special magic trick that I want to show you. I don’t show this to everyone so you should consider yourself very lucky. Everybody move in closer – you, too, teachers – this is going to be a blast.”

Everyone closed in tighter around him.

“I want to tell you a secret first.” His smile turned into a sneer and his voice got deeper and deadlier. “I fucking hate vampires!”

With shocked faces the teachers and children looked on as the clown pulled a detonator from inside his vest and pressed the red button, enveloping himself and everyone in a five foot radius around in the searing heat of fire and ball bearings as the Claymore mine he had strapped to his chest exploded, and blowing them all to pieces.

Chapter 4

Malachi, exquisitely dressed as was his custom, sat quietly inside of his spacious office high on the twenty-fifth floor of the building, his eyes closed as he absorbed the soft meditative music that played from the Bose sound system that surrounded the room. Thick black curtains were drawn across the windows so that you couldn't tell whether it was night or day outside, leaving the room to be illuminated by five candles that were strategically placed around the room. Two incense sticks burned on his desk, filling the space with an earthy aroma that Malachi breathed in.

"Mr. Nadell, I hate to bother you but there's someone here to see you," came a young female's voice over the intercom system.

"What have I told you about interrupting me while I'm enjoying my reflection time?"

"I know," she answered, her voice trembling, "but this is important."

"It better be. Who is it?"

"Former Vice President McDonnell is here to see you."

His head lifted up and a smile not unlike that of the Joker's stretched across his face.

"You don't say? A visiting dignitary is always welcomed. Please send him in."

"Yes sir."

Staring straight ahead at the door, patiently waiting for his guest, he sat up in his chair and cracked the knuckles on both of his hands. The door to the office opened and in stepped McDonnell, his silver eyes appearing blue due to contacts, making a beeline towards Malachi's desk.

“Former Vice President McDonnell,” stated Malachi as he rose and greeted him, extending his hand out, “how nice to see you. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to bask in your presence. For what do I owe this pleasure of you dropping by unannounced?”

McDonnell sat down without bothering to shake Malachi’s hand. “Let’s skip all the fake pleasantries and bullshit, shall we?”

Malachi was pissed at McDonnell’s shunning of his handshake. He slowly sat back down in his seat, disappointment and anger etched all over his face. “How do you come into my place of business and then disrespect me by not shaking my hand? Due to our long history together I’m going to give you a pass for that one but I will conveniently forget about that history of ours if you happen to make that same mistake again.”

“I’m too old to be scared by threats, Malachi.”

“And I’m too old to be make threats so, whatever you do, don’t ever mistake my words as such. Since we have stopped being pleasant with each other, why the fuck are you here?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard about the attacks in Kyoto?”

“Of course I’ve heard about them. Anyone not living in a cave or under a rock for the past month or so has knowledge of it; it’s been all over the papers and in the news. It’s a shame that someone would do such a thing like that; so many innocent victims were lost.”

McDonnell wasn’t buying Malachi’s cheap words. “I have a feeling that you have a lot more intimate knowledge of this event than you’re letting on.”

“If you’re accusing me of something then I would encourage you to come on out and say it.”

“I know very well how you feel about humans, Malachi. This attack has your fingerprints all over it and you know it. The other members of The Commission are not going to be happy about this; they already consider you a loose cannon as is.”

“I’m far from a loose cannon; I’m a businessman.”

“You can call yourself whatever you want but you and I know what’s really going on. Did you anticipate the blowback that your little stunt produced? Innocent children – vampire children, Malachi – were blown up as retaliation by the humans. Through your psychopathic actions you have done nothing but hinder everything that The Commission has built. How are we supposed to get humans to trust us when you and your group are doing things like this?”

“Are you finished?”

“Yes. I’ll let you speak.”

Malachi sat up in his seat and looked deeply into McDonnell’s eyes, his expression gravely serious. “Let me explain something to you, Mr. McDonnell, supposed leader of the Vampire Nation. You and your Commission are the biggest disgraces to every vampire that has ever walked on this earth. You had the nerve to parade yourself around on television when you were the vice president, talking about how you were our great and mighty leader, but you sit before me now wearing contacts to try and assimilate with the humans. Where is your pride? Where’s your dignity? This is me that you’re talking to!”

McDonnell looked down at Malachi’s desk.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you!!!!” McDonnell made eye contact with him again. “I’m not one of these civilians on the street that are fans of yours. I have seen you drink the blood of countless thousands of humans and now you decide that you want to wear your righteous cap? Please! Are you ashamed of what you are? You call me a psychopath but what you should be calling me is a patriot.”

“A patriot? Have you gone mad? Do you know how many advances we’ve made in the last five years?”

Advances for whom? Have you been so blinded as to not realize who has really been advancing? Did you really expect this great experiment between vampires and humans to actually work? They are scared of us and they should be. You’ve seen how it’s been since your great speech. You cannot continue to straddle both sides of the fence – you’re either a vampire or a human; you have to pick a team and stick by them at some point. What you in all of your and The Commission’s infinite wisdom have failed to realize is that your ideas and lofty expectations have been remarkably shortsighted. You thought that there would be peace but it’s only going to lead to war.”

“That’s what you’re hoping for, isn’t it? A war between vampires and humans is all that you’ve ever wanted.”

He smiled. “People hope to win the lottery; people hope to get a raise on their annual review. I don’t need hope for things that I know will happen. The time for us to take our natural place in the pecking order is upon us and time is also one of the things that you’re running out of. You can’t play peacemaker any longer. Join us or die right along with the humans.”

A look of sadness crossed McDonnell's face as he rubbed his eyes. "I don't know where you lost your way, Malachi. I used to have such high hopes for you but now all I have is disappointment."

Malachi snickered as he stood up and walked over to the window where he pulled back the curtains to reveal the city many stories below. "Come over here, please; I would like for you to see something."

McDonnell got up out of his seat and stepped up next to Malachi, both of them gazing out at the city. Malachi pointed at the canvas that was God's horizon as the sun set in the sky. "Do you see it?"

McDonnell looked confused. "See what?"

"The setting sun; it's a fitting metaphor for this moment in the history of the world. Light is still visible but the darkness is quickly approaching to engulf the earth and with it come all the things that go bump in the night and make ones heart go pitter pat in their chest. I am the one that will be leading the darkness. To quote something that you once told me, the world is on the brink of major changes and I am the one that's going to be handling the reigns of the revolution. Your voice no longer speaks for our race." He patted him forcefully on the back twice. "I think that both of us have always known that one day I was going to kill you."

McDonnell took a step back and stared at Malachi, shocked by the words that he had just heard. He turned and walked towards the door.

"Hey!" Malachi shouted out at him, stopping McDonnell right as he opened the door. "I'll be seeing you."

McDonnell said nothing as he turned and exited the office.

Chapter 5

Clayton brought the bottle up to his lips and took several large gulps of the golden tequila. He had drunk so much that it no longer burned any more. Draining it he flung the empty bottle onto the floorboard where it landed on top of a large black duffel bag that was zipped up and very bulky. He wiped his big meaty hand through his oily hair and then wiped the profuse amount of sweat from his brow. His stained wife beater that barely covered his gut was soaked with perspiration.

Beside him in the driver's seat was a mousy looking man by the name of River. He briefly took his eyes off the road and glanced over at Clayton with growing concern on his face. Clayton was now sobbing and heavy tears were rolling down his face. River turned his eyes back to the road as he swallowed the growing lump in his throat. "You alright, man?"

"Yeah, I'm good." He wiped his face again and then looked over at River. "Thanks for doing this for me; I wouldn't be able to do it by myself."

"You're welcome." He exhaled. "Are you sure that we're doing the right thing? I mean, we don't know if they..."

"I know that they took him, River!" he interrupted him, already knowing what he was going to say. "Jason wouldn't have just run off – not my son; not my Jason. The police can try to get me to believe that he ran away but they don't know my son like I do; he wouldn't do that because he was a good kid. Those vampire motherfuckers took him, I know it. You're with me, right?"

“Of course I am; I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t. We’ve kicked a lot of ass together but what you’re talking about doing ups the ante by a million degrees. This is a suicide mission.”

“What else do you want me to do then? Do you want me to sit around and wait for the vampires to police themselves? They don’t give a damn about us and there is no fucking way that they are going to investigate and prosecute any of the people involved. There’s no way! You seen what happened in Japan – the vampires attacked and all it took was one person to have the balls and strike back, letting them motherfuckers know that this shit is real right now! We’re about to do the same thing here that they did over there.”

“Innocent kids died in Japan.”

“No, River, vampires died over there. There is no such thing as an innocent vampire; remember that!”

“I got it.” There was no sense in arguing with him so he gave up on trying. “So what exactly is the plan here?”

“It’s simple – we’re going to find us a vampire and fuck them up. They took one of mine so I’m going to destroy one of theirs.”

“This city is full of vampires so how are we going to know which one to pick?”

“I’ll just know, alright? Can you do me a favor and just shut up and drive; I need to think.”

River went to say something but hesitated, instead focusing on the road. Clayton unzipped the duffel bag and removed a 9MM pistol from it which he tucked under his

shirt and into the small of his back, a lighter which he stuffed into his front pants pocket, and a small glass jar full of gasoline which he placed inside the pocket of his overcoat.

Now loaded up with an assortment of weapons he returned his attention to the windshield where, after a few miles, he spotted an albino looking woman walking alone with very few people around. “Up there River, is that one?”

He leaned forward to get a better look. “Yeah, I think it is. What do you want me to do?”

“Pull up a little bit in front of her; I’ll get out and ask her for directions. Keep the truck running and do NOT take this bitch out of drive, understand?”

River nodded his head up and down. “I gotcha.”

He pulled up and stopped the truck about six feet in front of the woman. Clayton reached inside the glove compartment and pulled out an ink pen and a flyer which he placed inside the pocket where the gas was at. He looked over at River. “Be ready. I’ll be right back.”

The door opened and Clayton exited the vehicle, approaching the woman with a friendly smile that masked his true intentions. “Excuse me, can you help me with some directions?”

She stopped, looking up at him with a set of big beautiful maple syrup colored eyes. Staring at her he actually felt disappointed, thinking that he had made a mistake in his selection. “Where are you trying to get to?”

As she smiled he could see the faintest glimpse of the fangs in her mouth and he felt good again. “I... I’m trying to get to 57th and Main but my buddy and I are a little lost; we don’t come to this side of town much.”

“No worries, I can get you there; you’re actually not that far off. What you need to do is...”

“Hold on a second, let me get something to write this down.”

Using his right hand he reached inside of his coat and retrieved the jar of gasoline which he quickly brought out and smashed across her face, the liquid and fumes taking root inside of her mouth and nose. As she took a step back in shock, her hands rising up to her face, he whipped the lighter out and flicked it, the flame shooting out as bright as the sun. “This is for Jason!”

He tossed the lighter towards her and the fire kissed the gasoline fumes and took bloom, engulfing the woman in a blanket of Hell fire. She dropped to the ground and rolled around and, as she did, he pulled out the 9MM and emptied the clip into her flaming body.

Laying on the ground the most terrible sound came from deep within her, a high pitched scream much like a whistle that flew outwards through her mouth. Clayton covered his ears with his hands and then looked around to see that the few humans in the area were covering their ears as well but the five vampires that had just exited the convenience store were looking at him, anger on their faces as their fingernails descended and formed claws.

Clayton took off towards the truck as they began to give chase, diving into the front seat. “Go, go, go!”

River floored it as Clayton slammed the door shut. The truck shot off like a bullet and rocketed down the street. Now sitting up in his seat Clayton looked through the back

window to find that the five vampires were hot on their tail and getting closer, no longer running, but now flying through the air.

“What the fuck, Clayton?!?!”

“I don’t know what happened. She made some kind of noise that was like a signal for them. Don’t worry, just keep driving; I’ll handle it.”

He dug into the bag of weapons and pulled out a shotgun. He looked towards his right and it was then that his door was ripped off and one of the vampires reached in to try and grab him. Clayton pointed the shotgun at its chest and pulled the trigger, the blast knocking the vampire back and causing it to fall to the asphalt and roll as cars swerved to keep from hitting it.

River continued to navigate through the street at breakneck speed while Clayton leaned out of the truck and let out shot after shot, taking aim at the vampires that continued to pursue the truck, keeping them temporarily at bay but not losing them. The shotgun ran out of bullets so he ducked back inside the cabin, tossing the shotgun to the floor. Into the bag he went again, this time pulling out an AK-47.

The sight of the big black AK scared River even more shitless than he already was. “Where in the fuck did you get that from??” He quickly turned back to the road, weaving through cars and speeding through red lights and stop signs while his head swiveled around like Linda Blair, checking the rearview mirror for vampires while also trying to keep an eye on Clayton to see what he was going to do next. Cold sweat poured down his face.

“I don’t need you to ask questions, I need you to drive,” he calmly replied back as he flipped the safety off of the AK-47. “Take the ramp up ahead and get on the freeway –

we've gotta put some distance between us and them. Hold your ears because this will probably get loud.”

He let off a shot, sending a single bullet flying through the back window of the truck, shards of glass flying in all directions. Clayton knelt down, placing the barrel of the gun through what was left of the window and took aim, letting off a barrage of shots, most of which found their way into the bodies of the vampires that were giving chase.

River guided the truck onto the ramp to enter the freeway and then floored it again, pedal to the metal with the engine screaming like a banshee as the RPM's and speedometer rose like the temperature in Texas during the height of summer.

The five vampires split up, two veering off to the left and the other three moving over to the right, their speed increasing as they began to make up ground on the truck, ducking and trying to dodge the bullets that continued to explode from the gun.

Clayton swung around, firing at the three on the right. As he did one of the two on the left, a big strong male that was built like a bull, sped up and then slammed into the side of the truck causing River to temporarily lose control as the truck bounced off of a minivan. Clayton lost his balance and fell backwards, his back against the dashboard, as River grabbed the wheel and again gained control of the vehicle.

Regaining his composure Clayton screamed out “DUCK!!!!” and, as River obliged, Clayton unloaded on the vampire that had rammed them, stitching his body up with a row of hot lead from his neck to his belly button that knocked him out of the air and into the back of a Honda Civic. He turned and pointed the AK back through the window but then relaxed when he realized that the remaining four vampires had started to fall back.

“I think that they've given up!” he shouted. “The fuckers have quit. Fuck yeah!!!”

“Are you serious?” asked River, not believing it. He let his foot off the gas a little bit and then turned to see what Clayton was looking at. The vampires were growing smaller in the distance and appeared to be standing around their fallen comrade as he lay in the crunched up Civic. “I don’t believe it.” He looked back at the road. “Shit!!”

Coming straight for them was a vampire and he sliced through the windshield like an Olympic diver through a swimming pool, detaching River’s head as he traveled through the back window and performed a flip in mid air, landing on the pavement with the type of precision that would have garnered him a perfect ten from the stingiest of judges. He tossed River’s head over his shoulder as he watched the truck skid to the right and then roll over three times, ejecting Clayton from the cabin before coming to rest against a tree.

Lying on his back, eyes closed with his left arm hanging by the slimmest piece of tendon and his right hand still somehow managing to clutch the AK. He coughed a few times and then opened his eyes. He attempted to rise up but the pain was too intense. Letting out a yell he laid back down, his eyes looking up at the sky.

Fear displaced the pain and his eyes were as large as hula-hoops as a vampire stepped up and stood over him, the very vampire that he had burned and shot earlier. Although it was healing her face was melted like a Barbie doll that had been left out in the sun and her hair was burned completely off.

“Remember me?”

Chapter 6

He was still an imposing and intimidating figure even at this stage of his life.

Because of that, people generally had one of two reactions whenever he showed up or his name was thrown up in a conversation: they either hated or loved him; there was no gray area with this man.

General Freedman was constantly looking for that little push that he felt would give him the edge that he was searching for and, as he watched the videotaped footage of former President Clark and former Vice President McDonnell discuss the existence of vampires and how humans should be tolerant and accepting of them, he knew that he had found it. It was like a sign from God pointing him towards his destiny as everything fell into place around him.

Forty years he had served his country in it's many times of need – forty long years. He often wondered where all that time had went. It's funny how life changes a person. It seemed like only yesterday when he was nothing but a fresh faced, green, and wet behind the ears recruit who had no idea as to what he was going to do with his life. In all honesty he had really only joined the military as a way to get a little job security and an escape from the small backwoods Mississippi town that would have offered him nothing but a lot of drinking and a lot more trouble had he stayed there; he had never envisioned the Army as a career.

He had heard it said countless times before but, when it came to his life, he truly believed that if it wasn't for the Army he would either be in jail or six feet under, more than likely the latter. He was out of control back then and he had known it but he was powerless to stop the downward trajectory on his own. Besides marrying his high school

sweetheart, joining the military was the greatest decision that he had ever made. He was like fresh clay in the hands of the United States Army, molded from a boy that was young, dumb, and full of cum into a physically and mentally tough son of a bitch that had clawed his way up the ranks from being a soldier on the front lines ducking and dodging bullets into a four star general that had helped to call the shots.

After retiring eight years ago he had wasted no time jumping into the political arena head first, once again dedicating himself to the people. He used his military background as a springboard to successfully run for mayor of the town that he had grown up in and then, after being seasoned for four years in that role, he set his sights on a much loftier goal – he was going to throw his hat in the ring to be the next President of the United States. He had mulled the decision over and over in his head and, after having counsel with his pastor and through a lot of prayer, he felt good about his decision. It wasn't until he talked to his beloved wife about it, her giving him a thumbs up and a kiss, that it was really cemented; if she hadn't have approved of it then he wouldn't have given it a second thought.

That was three years ago, but this was now. He had won a second term as mayor and, sitting in his recliner in the mayor's residence, his legs crossed and right hand tapping on the arm of the chair, he stared at the flat screen television that was mounted on the wall of his darkened media room, becoming more furious with each image that flickered across the screen. He couldn't remember how many times he had watched this footage but he knew that it was an awful lot; so many times in fact that he had to replace the DVD five times now due to the constant viewing. He knew how it made him feel to be watching it but that was exactly why he did it – he needed that fuel to keep him going.

Each time he watched it, he caught something new that he had failed to notice before: a subtle change in someone's voice, the twitching of an eye, or a movement of someone's hand; it almost became like an obsession for him.

The sight of his wife walking into the room with a tall glass of ice cold lemonade in her hand caused him to sit up. Martha was still the most radiant woman in the world to him, looking exactly as she did the first day that he had laid eyes upon her over forty years ago, granted she had a few more wrinkles now and her honey blond hair had been transformed over time into a platinum white. She still had those wonderful green eyes that sparkled like two flawless twenty carat emeralds.

She handed the glass over to him and then sat down upon his lap. "Thank you, beautiful." He kissed her on the cheek, inhaling the soft floral scent of the perfume that wafted from her neck.

"You're welcome." She glanced over at the television, seeing the familiar images. "Couldn't resist watching it again, could you?"

"You know how I am, Martha; I can't help it. In order to be a good leader and make everything right I feel like I need to study the past in order to find out where things went wrong."

"I know. You're going to do a great job as President."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Hopefully I can get around five million or so people to feel the same way that you do."

"Why are you so worried? Your numbers are looking great; you're leading in almost all of the polls and you have the support of the most powerful woman in the world and all of her friends and followers. If the vote were today you would win by a landslide."

“I know what the polls say and I’ve heard all of the reports but, as I learned time and time again in the military, numbers are just that; they’re only numbers and are always fluid and subject to change at any moment. I like being in control and right now my destiny lies in the hands of the people of the United States. I keep wondering what else I need to do in order to secure that extra vote. Each vote is like a potential bullet and I need to have as many bullets as possible in my arsenal come November.”

“I understand your concern and I know just how much this election means to you. I have faith in you; the American people have faith in you as well. You’ve been blessed this far and you’ve got to believe that those blessings will only continue to bear fruit.”

“You’re right, Martha; you’re always right.” He took a deep breath and then exhaled through his nose. “You’re like sweet music to my savage beast. What would I ever do without you?”

“You would survive as you’ve always done.” She got up off of his lap and then bent down, planting a kiss on the top of his chrome dome. “Are you coming to bed soon?”

“Give me an hour.”

“I’m going to hold you to that; one hour, mister.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

His eyes remained on her, a boyish smile on his face as she walked out of the room and made a left, disappearing down the hallway. He took a few swallows of the lemonade and then set it down next to the latest issue of *TIME* magazine. A close up picture of his face graced the cover, his penetrating eyes staring straight ahead at the reader, reaching into and gripping tightly onto the soul of every person who managed to look at it. ‘Why the President and every vampire in America should be afraid’ was the headline.

Reaching over he picked the magazine up and briefly thumbed through it until he got to the article about himself. There was a picture of the current President on the left hand side – President Tracie Black, the nation’s first ever female President of the United States – and General Freedman’s photo on the adjoining side in his full military attire. She was a tough senator from New York and was good at what she did; to General Freedman what that amounted to was being good at riding the coattails of President Clark all the way to the top.

As his eyes continued to examine the picture and skim over the article he could feel the anger once again building up inside of himself so he set the magazine down, his eyes again focusing on the television. He never understood how the American people elected her; she was weak just like her predecessors and people had to be extremely naïve in order to not see that.

He shook his head and continued to think, his mind jumping to the fact that, in a little over a month, he would be having his final debate with the President and, subsequently, his last chance to further convince the majority of the people out there like President Black who were pro-vampire that they were wrong. Making vampires the equivalent of humans was, to him, an act of treason. The terrorist attacks that vampires had committed, and that’s all you could describe them as, only served to hammer that fact home even further for him. You can’t get a zebra to change his stripes. Vampires were like wild animals that pretended to be domesticated, all the while patiently waiting, sitting back and biding their time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. He knew what was coming and he hoped that the American people – people all over the world for that matter – would start to figure it out before it was too late.

Chapter 7

They lived in an ideal location, amongst everyone, but, at the same time, around no one. Residing in Milwaukee allowed them to remain anonymous amongst their Midwestern neighbors. Malachi had found the perfect house for him and his group of followers to live together and not be disturbed. Their nearest neighbors were well over a mile away. The eight thousand square feet dwelling was more than enough for each of them to have their own space and it served as a more than suitable base of operations for Malachi.

He sat in his office, eyes fixated on the empty space of his desk. Moonlight poured into the office – the only source of light in the room – but his vision was so keen that it made no difference to him whether it was daylight or pitch black. Sitting there, he thought about what they had accomplished so far and he was impressed by all of their attacks and had confidence that future operations would go just as smoothly. What he had in store would make everything that happened before be considered chump change. What he planned to do next would really serve as the catalyst to kick start his reign, that he was sure of.

He placed his improbably clean Italian leather boots on top of the desk and tilted his chair back to get more comfortable. It was necessary for him to have this time to sit back and reflect without being distracted. His followers had already gotten used to him spending hour upon hour doing this. They were also used to him voicing his opinion on how humans were beginning to look at vampires as being weak and how it disgusted him that they possessed so much power over them while vampires went along living side by

side with them like dogs. He had much better plans for the vampire race and humans were the only obstacle standing in the way of that plan.

He looked over at Angoria as she slept peacefully on the couch in the far corner of the room. He liked to say that she kept him tame and also inspired him on his quest to make sure that the vampire way of life was preserved, sticking by him to make sure that they did any and everything necessary to see that their agenda was fulfilled; he loved her for that. Watching her now he could see a smile form upon her face, almost as if she could read his thoughts while she slept.

His mind traveled back to how they first met in Romania where they both had been born and raised before joining the cause and making the journey to the United States. He had seen her in passing and her scent was intoxicating to him, making him drunk with love. Like him she was a pureblood and that pushed him even harder to approach her. Their eyes met and they spoke to each other without ever having to say a word. He would have liked to say that they were the first to truly fall in love at first sight but he strongly believed that his parents held that title. Then, just as now, she was exquisite with her long and slender body with skin as white as milk. Her dark hair, splashes of red throughout, extended down to her back and felt like spun silk in his hands.

As happy as he was with her and everything that he had accomplished so far his heart still had a void in it; not being able to fulfill his purpose was making him angry, though he knew that day of glory was swiftly approaching. He closed his eyes and inhaled her fragrance at which point he immediately became calm again.

A knock on the door took his thoughts off of her. "Enter my friend," he said, already knowing who it was. He removed his feet from the desk and then sat up.

Strader entered the room, his presence exuding authority as it always did. Malachi admired his power which was why he had hand picked him as his right hand man. He looked over to where Angoria was sleeping and then up at Malachi, being sure to keep his voice low. “May I?” he inquired, motioning to the chair.

“Of course.”

He sat down. “I’m beginning to have some concerns and I would like to gain some understanding from you.”

“I implore you to speak freely with whatever it is that is on your mind; you know that I value and respect your opinion.”

“Thank you. Do you feel that it is absolutely necessary for us to make these attacks and then creep back into the shadows until the next one? Why not continue to strike at them until they beg for us to stop?”

“There will be a time for that but right now is not that time. It is imperative that right now we continue on the path that we’ve been traveling on until we’ve received enough attention to force the United States to act. Once the United States is drawn into this game of ours, and it WILL happen, the rest of the world will follow suit and then we will get what we’re looking for. Right now humans haven’t been pushed hard enough; there are too many of them that like us and too many vampires that are okay living with humans. There has to be a wedge driven between the two and that’s where we come in – it’s the only way to get back on top; without a war we will never be able to claim our place. We still have some vampires that don’t approve of what we’re doing and that’s only because their eyes haven’t been opened and that’s where you, Angoria, I and the rest come in; we

are the ones that will wake them from their slumber. Do you remember how the Americans were forever changed by 9/11?”

“I do.”

“That’s what we have to do; we need to give them a similar type of attack. We will suffer a few losses – casualties can always be expected – but it is those very casualties that will help fuel the engine that will drive us to victory. Can you imagine what would happen if we unleashed all of our attacks without the rest of our brothers and sisters joining us? We would be missing out on an integral and vast tool, one that could potentially side with the humans if we don’t steer them in the right direction. Do you understand?”

Strader did understand more clearly now. The goal was to rally up every vampire to fight in order to make their eventual strikes against the humans that much more effective.

“I see your point.”

“I ask that you be patient, brother. What I have planned will force America’s hand and signal to them that we mean business.”

“I have faith in you,” he said as he rose up from his seat. “I have no more questions. Thank you for your time.”

“Anytime.”

The door to Malachi’s office had remained open during their conversation and, about twenty feet down the hallway, Strader could see Kanice looking towards the room with her attentive eyes. He had no time to humor her so he walked off in the other direction.

Kanice looked sad and slightly disappointed as she watched him walk away from her. She had always felt drawn to him but that feeling was never reciprocated by him back to her. She supposed that it was only natural that she felt this way towards him since it was he who had made her this way so, therefore, a part of him coursed through her veins.

Before being turned she had been widely regarded as one of the deadliest assassins in all of Japan. Her father, the unquestioned lord of the feared Five Hand Clan, taught her everything that there was to know about the masterful art of killing all starting at the tender age of five. She was only six when she first took a man's life and that pleased her father to no end.

Over the years her skills continued to blossom and, with her father's blessing, she started her own clan at the age of fifteen where she was considered legendary until the sword of a rival clansman finally ended her reign and brought her down, leaving her blood soaked body to die in the street. That was when Strader appeared to her like an angel out of the depths of darkness to which she was drifting into.

That was many years ago, now she was here in this house with him and others like her who championed for the rights of vampires. Feeling the need to occupy her mind she exited the room and headed towards the workout facility to get polished up on her martial arts training. Upon entering the empty room she brushed the short bangs from her eyes, already knowing that she was going to be here for a while.

As Kanice began to work out her frustrations Strader continued his stroll, passing by but not looking into Gethina's room. As was the usual for her she was alone, a copy of *Men Are From Mars, Woman Are From Venus* in her hands. Though it appeared that she

was deep into the book it was all a ruse; as had been the case ever since it had happened, more frequently as of late, her mind kept flashing back to the assault at the fair. She had no problem at all killing humans but she couldn't shake the idea of biting Michael with him being so young. She had never done that before and she now felt guilty for allowing such power to be inside the body of a child. But what could she have done? There were only two options if she hadn't done what she did: either, best case scenario, one of the others would have turned him or, worst case scenario, they would have killed him and possibly her as well.

The sound of a door slamming loudly dislodged her thoughts and she, along with everyone else in the house, knew exactly who it was. Sherona was home and she was very drunk again, fresh from a night out of heavy partying which was the norm for her. Stumbling to her room she collapsed onto her bed and fell asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Sherona was never the most popular member of the group but they had to put up with her because Malachi wanted her around and Malachi always got what he wanted. Grimble was a split second away from killing her when they first crossed paths with Sherona but Malachi had intervened and spared her life. Taking notice of her pin-up model looks he felt that she could be of use to him later on, especially considering that she was only eighteen at the time. Her sex appeal would make it easy for her to seduce any man, and some women, and that was always a good ace to have in the hole.

*

Kanice was still working out, waving and slicing her katana swords through the air with a workman's precision. She had been at it for more than four hours now and had

built up a solid sweat that flew off of her with every movement she made. Michael was sitting in the corner studying her – taking it all in – noticing her immense level of concentration and how focused her eyes were. Her movements were quick and deadly but also elegant and even beautiful, all of them punctuated by grunts like the sound Serena Williams makes after a wicked backhand shot.

Strader stepped into the room and was content to chill off to the side, leaning with his back against the wall, one leg propped up behind him and his arms crossed on his chest. Upon noticing him Kanice stopped what she was doing and placed her arms to her sides and then bowed towards him, recognizing his presence as she did with everyone who entered a room she was in. He gave a nod back. “Why do you waste your time practicing with weapons as if we need them? Our bodies are the only weapons that we will ever need.”

Kanice walked over and placed the katanas back on their spot on the wall alongside an arsenal of assorted weapons such as throwing stars, daggers, and swords just to name a few. “I am very much aware that our heightened speed, strength, and abilities make us lethal enough to where the use of weapons is more or less pointless but we are not invincible. Let me ask you this: what happens when humans develop weaponry that requires us to do more than just fight with our bare hands?”

He waved his hand in a dismissive manner, her question being a ridiculous one to him. “Let them. Their knives, guns, tanks, or whatever else they come at us with will not be able to stop us.”

“Pride is the downfall of a foolish man.”

“It’s a good thing that I’m a vampire instead of a man then.”

“Hmmmpph,” she replied, letting him continue to think whatever he wanted.

Strader pushed himself off the wall and then walked over to the specially made punching bags that were made out of concrete and steel. Regular bags didn’t stand a chance – concrete and steel were the only combination that would hold up for more than a few days.

“See you later,” said Kanice to Michael as she exited the room.

“Bye.”

“Come here,” Strader told Michael, motioning him over. Michael got up and walked over to him. “I’m going to teach you something very valuable so pay attention. Watch this.”

Michael watched intently as Strader reared back and unleashed a powerful right hand onto the bag, a huge chunk of concrete flying off of it and landing onto the floor where it cracked into smaller pieces. He held his undamaged hand out for Michael to see. “All you need are these. We are the most powerful creatures to ever walk the earth. You hit it now.”

Michael took a swing, his fist landing against the concrete with an anti-climactic thud that barely shook the bag. “Owww!!” he said as he looked at his skinned up knuckles.

His effort made Strader smile. “Simply being a vampire isn’t enough; you’ll need to make your body strong.” He began to punch away at the bag, the three inch thick chains that held it rattling as the punches got harder. With one final left he struck the middle of the bag and shattered it, the bag bursting into pieces and hitting the floor, the awesome sound of its destruction echoing in the room.

Michael stood in amazement. “That was awesome. Will I be as strong as you one day?”

“Mikey, you have no idea how strong you can be.”

*

The next morning Angoria rose with the rising of the sun. Her silver eyes found her mate as he sat at his desk still knee deep in meditation, failing to even notice that she was now awake. Quietly she got off the couch, the black satin sheet that had been covering her body fell to the floor revealing her perfectly sculpted body – her breasts were still as perky as a teenagers and her legs were defined and smooth as freshly buffed marble. She made her way to the connecting bathroom and slipped into the shower.

Fifteen minutes later she emerged from the bathroom, appearing like a Greek goddess. She was still naked and her body glistened from the beads of water that continued to slide down her skin. This time Malachi paid full attention and stood to pay the utmost respect to the beauty that was walking towards him. She smiled shyly as his eyes caressed her body.

He stepped from behind the desk and pulled her close as she got to him. Their lips gently touched as he pulled her tighter. He could feel her hand as she began to unzip his pants and grab him; he was not lacking and she wanted ever inch of him inside of her.

The fingernails on each of her hands extended down several inches and she used them to rip his clothes off. He scooped her up, light as a feather she was in his arms, and then placed her down upon the desk.

“Take me. Take all of me.”

Take her he did, penetrating with force as she wrapped her arms around him, dragging her claws into his back with each thrust he pounded into her. Blood dried on his back as his cuts mended themselves and they continued to make love like ravenous lions, clawing and biting at each other.

Chapter 8

The sky was an inky black and the moon was absent outside the window as Sherona, Grimble, and Strader sat in Sherona's room trying to decide on which club or bar that they were going to hit up; this was always a problem for them. Sherona wanted a place with plenty of men, Strader wanted somewhere with good music, while Grimble just wanted to drink.

Strader was sitting on Sherona's bed, looking on at her while she finished touching up her makeup, transforming her skin from pearl white to a nice sun-kissed peach complexion. Grimble was relaxing on a beanbag in the corner, eyeing Sherona and wondering what it was that men found so fascinating about her. He took a long look around the room that was filled with mirrors of all sizes and pictures of her. He couldn't help but think about how vain she was.

"Ok, if we're not going to Rave then how about The Bad Genie?" asked Grimble with a thick coating of irritation in his voice.

"That's a human's only club," she replied.

"What's your point?" asked Strader, not concerned with what type of club it was.

She finished her makeup and then glanced over at the both of them. "I was just saying. If you guys don't care then The Bad Genie it is. Question is, can either of you keep up with me?" She held her arms out, ready to be escorted out of the room.

Both Grimble and Strader rolled their eyes, walked out of the room, and then headed towards the garage. As they traveled they passed by Michael's room and he popped his head out.

"Where are you guys going? I want to go!"

Sherona walked up and gave Michael a hug and a kiss on the cheek, leaving a big cherry red impression of her lips on his face. “Sorry little man but you can’t go on this trip; it’s for grown folks only.”

“I hardly ever get to do anything. For the last five years I’ve been stuck in this house just like I was stuck in my wheelchair; I want to do something like you guys.”

Strader knelt down and whispered into Michael’s ear. “I’ll take you somewhere real special tomorrow, okay?” He winked at him.

That wink excited Michael. “Promise?”

“I would never lie to you, Michael.”

“Okay.” He ran back into his room and they continued on their way.

*

The Bad Genie was popular tonight, evident by the line of anxious club goers wrapped around the building, some bopping to the sound of the loud techno music as it pulsed from inside the club while others chatted on their phones or with their friends that they were standing in line with.

The three compadres turned the corner and walked up to the front of the line – why should they have to wait behind humans? – Strader and Grimble walking a step in front of Sherona.

The security guard, a buffed up and bald muscle head in a too tight fitting shirt, looked at them and noticed their silver eyes, instantly recognizing them as the vampires that they were. “This is a humans only club,” he told them, holding his hand out in front of Strader and Grimble.

Strader eyed the bouncer and the hand that was so dangerously close to touching him. He growled deep and low. “Don’t you know that it is illegal to discriminate against vampires? We could sue you...., or worse.” He bared his fangs at the guard in a menacing fashion.

The force of the growl and the sight of Strader’s fangs startled the guard and caused him to take a few steps back. He held his hands up and let the three of them pass without any further harassment.

Grimble followed behind Strader, duplicating the same growl that Strader had given and Sherona followed him. “They’re such animals!” she said mockingly as she caressed the man’s chin with her left hand and then walked past him. “I promise that we’ll play nice.”

The smell of cheap perfume, acrid cigarette smoke, heavy cologne, and warm, pulsating blood hit their noses as they stepped foot inside the club. The DJ was rocking on the turntables and the dance floor was packed full of people.

“See you later, boys!” she shouted over the music as she walked backwards onto the dance floor, her shoulders already moving up and down to the rhythm.

“I’m thirsty,” Grimble leaned over and told Strader. “Lets get something to drink.”

“Lead the way.”

Strader followed Grimble as they made their way towards the bar, brushing against body after body, somehow resisting the urge to shove them aside or simply devour them like pieces of sushi. Grimble imagined how much fun it would be to send one of them into a wall and hear their bones crunch, the thought of blood flying out of their mouth as

they slid down the wall and collapsed to the floor putting a smile on his face and an erection in his pants.

Strader's head tilted upwards, his nose open as he inhaled the aroma of the humans gyrating around him: women dancing with other women, men dancing with women and grinding on their asses. His eyes closed for a second and he clenched his teeth tightly, wanting so badly to bite into and devour the neck of a woman that had the audacity to run her hand across his crotch as she walked by him. She and all the rest were clueless as to how tempting they were; stupid fucking humans.

They arrived at the bar and Grimble pounded his fist on the top of it. One of the three bartenders, a young exotic looking woman named Christina, walked up to them. "What can I get you two gentlemen?" Catching a good look at Grimble and realizing that he and Strader were vampires her friendly face was replaced with one of trepidation.

"How much for a shot of your blood?" inquired Grimble, a dead ass serious expression on his already scary face. She said nothing; all she could do was stare at the two of them. His expression switched from deadly to playful. "I'm just fucking with you. Two shots of Patron, please."

A wave of relief washed over her and she was able to smile again. "Coming right up."

As she walked away his faced turned serious again. His head was aching and the cigarette smoke was putting him in a foul mood.

Christina returned with the shots, setting them down in front of Grimble. "That will be \$10.00."

Grimble produced a \$100 bill from his pants pocket and passed it over to her. “Keep them coming; two shots every five minutes. Can you do that for me?” She took the money and then nodded her head up and down. “Good.”

He downed the first shot and then the second one immediately after. *Damn they taste good.* Alcohol seemed to be the only thing that numbed his senses to the point where he could tolerate humans, at least that was the excuse he gave.

Strader kept his back turned to the bar, opting instead to look out at the dance floor as he tapped his right foot on the floor, enjoying this particular musical selection. He looked back at Grimble and prodded him on the shoulder, motioning for him to check Sherona out. Grimble turned and took a gander at her.

Sherona had everyone’s attention as people were being drawn to her like Winnie the Pooh to a honey pot. There were at least twenty-five to thirty people surrounding her and the men were having a hard time keeping their eyes off of her. The women who were not dancing stood by with their girlfriends, faces full of disgust as they quietly spewed insults back and forth to each other, trying to hide the fact that they all wished that they could be like her.

As they continued to watch, Sherona whipped her head around in the air, her eyes closed as her body bounced up and down to the infectious beat. A man approached her from behind and held her close at the waist while the two women stepped up and danced in front of her, kissing her neck and chest with tender exploring pecks. Sherona loved it, her mouth gaping open as she laughed.

The track abruptly switched and the music got slower and more intense, the percussion on the track loud and powerful. Grimble turned back to the bar and wrapped

his hands around the next set of drinks that had been brought to him. Strader kept his attention on the dance floor, his head nodding back and forth as he got more and more into the music.

Sherona pulled one of the two women that was kissing her closely in front of her, the woman's body pressing up against hers as she looked deeply into her eyes and then kissed her softly on the lips. The woman stared back at Sherona as the kiss ended, finding herself wanting more of her. Sherona smiled, gave her a wink, eyeballed the other woman that was dancing in front of her, and then turned around to dance with the man that was holding her by the waist.

He was the stereotypical male club goer, sporting a slicked back hairdo and wearing a tight white t-shirt with black slacks and a pair of brown alligator shoes. All of his accessories were blinged out: diamond earrings in both ears, an iced out watch on one hand and a nice bracelet on the other, and he even had diamonds in his belt buckle. He had that arrogant feeling of owning her as she smiled and helped him dance by keeping the beat for him, getting turned on from the slow and hard movements as she went up and down, going lower and lower each time. The two women that had been kissing her gazed on, patiently waiting for her to turn back around and show them some more attention.

A group of five men, all being the heavily tattooed biker types, cut their way through the crowd and made their way up near Sherona. The one in front grabbed the arm of the girl that Sherona had kissed. "What the fuck are you doing, huh?"

The dancing came to a halt as everyone's eyes were drawn to the men. The man drew his arm back and smacked spit out of the woman's mouth, causing her to fall to the ground after which he set his eyes upon Sherona who was staring curiously at him.

“Is there a problem?” she asked.

“There’s a very big problem. Maybe you didn’t get the memo, bloodsucker, but you’re not welcomed here! Don’t you have your own clubs to go to?”

Strader saw the trouble that was brewing and punched Grimble lightly on the arm as he leaned away from the counter and began walking towards Sherona. Grimble gulped down his remaining shot and followed Strader, his claws descending from his fingers as he walked.

“I beg to differ,” explained Sherona, “as it looks like your woman was welcoming every part of me.” She licked her lips and that really sent the man over the edge.

“I’ve wanted to kick a vampire’s ass for the longest,” he shot back while his friends looked on, goofy smiles on their liquored up faces.

Grimble stepped up and stood in front of the man, close enough to smell the beer on his breath, staring him and his friends down as they looked at themselves in the reflection of his eyes. “What’s the problem, meat bags?”

“You and everyone like you are the problems,” chimed in one of the men, his body full of liquid courage.

“What are you going to do about it?” asked Grimble. “I don’t think that you’ll do shit.”

“Let’s just go, guys,” said Sherona as she turned and headed towards the exit, “I don’t have the energy for this shit tonight.”

“You’re lucky,” Strader warned the men. “You better hope that we never cross paths again.”

Grimble and Strader turned and began to follow Sherona. With their backs turned one of the men took the beer that he was holding and tossed it at Strader, showering him, Grimble, and Sherona with beer and shards of glass from that mug that broke over Strader's head. "Get the fuck outta here, bloodsuckers!" yelled the mug thrower.

The three of them came to a stop as did the music in the club. There was nothing but eerie silence as everyone in the club looked on at them to see what was going to pop off next.

Sherona was the first to turn around, pieces of glass embedded in her hair and beer dripping from her face, ruining her carefully crafted makeup. She stepped in front of Strader and Grimble who, by this time, had also turned around to face the five men who had just unknowingly signed their own death certificates.

"You drunk motherfuckers," she told them, her fangs descending from her gums and claws extending from her fingers. "You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?"

Strader and Grimble's claws and fangs got into killing position as well. Smiles crept up on both of their faces, having been waiting for this moment all night. This couldn't have played out any better.

The man that threw the beer was no longer as talkative as before. All of his courage was now exiting out of his penis as he pissed his pants.

"Looks like the party is really about to start now," stated Grimble, a wicked grin on his face.

"You just killed everyone in here." Strader grabbed the nearest person to him, a young black girl with blond hair, and shredded her stomach. Her dying scream of agony

as her insides hit the floor was the signal to everyone that they needed to get the fuck out of dodge.

There was a mad dash towards the exit, people screaming and running for their lives, pushing their fellow patrons down in a frenzied attempt to get out alive. Strader began mowing through the slower ones, using his teeth and claws to rip and destroy all who were unfortunate enough to come near him.

Sherona and Grimble set their sights on the five that had started all of these problems in the first place. Sherona leapt for the one that had originally approached her as he tried his best to flee. She grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around, his eyes widening as Sherona's fist hurtled towards his face and connected with it, her enhanced strength causing his head to explode like a toad in a microwave as blood, bone, and tissue flew everywhere.

Grimble had one of the others pinned against the wall and was tearing at his neck and back like a rabid coyote, pulling large chunks of flesh away to where the man's spine was exposed, the pieces of meat landing on the floor like jagged pieces of steak.

Finished with that one, he levitated high above the floor, using his bird's eye view to spot one of the other three remaining tough guys. *Get him!* Grimble darted after him as the man sprinted towards the bar, picking up a bar stool along the way and smashing it across the man's back, the stool disintegrating from the impact. The man fell against the front of the bar and Grimble flipped him onto his back, a fresh tsunami of blood flowing from his throat as Grimble ran his claws across it. Splashes of blood flew into Grimble's face and he used his tongue to sample it – it was perfect; clean, warm, and abundant.

Having executed those that weren't able to make it out of the club Strader turned his focus to the humans that were left and that happened to be only the beer thrower and one of his friends. The two men were standing in the middle of what used to be the dance floor surrounded by Sherona, Grimble, and a mountain of dead bodies. He joined them as they cornered the men in.

The beer thrower fell to his knees and began to sob, begging for his life. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Please don't kill me. Show mercy, I beg you!"

"You're not sorry, you're pathetic," said Sherona as she took her right hand and lifted him up off the floor, suspending him in the air by his neck. "I want you to see something." She spun him around so that he could see his friend. "This is what happens to people that fuck with us."

Grimble and Strader took their cue and started ripping into the man's body with their teeth and claws. He cried out in pain for a brief second before his body simply gave up and shut down, going limp and falling to the floor in an ever growing pool of his own blood that mingled with the gallons of blood that already covered the floor. His body looked like a lawnmower had run over it when they finished.

The beer thrower had no choice but to look at his friend's mangled and lifeless body. Tears rolled down his cheek as Sherona released him and he crumpled to the floor. Turning him around she looked into his eyes, seeing the fear and dread that were evident in them. "Do you think that I'm beautiful?"

He nodded his head up and down vehemently. "Yes!"

That made her happy. "You should consider yourself fortunate that my face is the last one that you'll ever see in this lifetime." With those words she bit down into his neck

and ripped away his throat, blood flying straight up in the air like a geyser. She pushed him and he fell down up on his friend's body.

The sound of sirens could be heard approaching. Strader, Grimble, and Sherona all looked at each other. "Time to go," said Strader.

"What about the car?" asked Sherona.

"There's no time," Strader informed her, "will have to leave it."

That didn't make her happy. "Man!! I loved that car."

"We'll get you another one," said Grimble. "Move your ass!"

They exploded through the roof and into the night.

Chapter 9

In almost all major cities across the globe there are certain parts of town where each race or group of people come together to live amongst their own; safety in numbers if you will. Vampire Town, or V-Town as it was more commonly referred to, was a relatively safe haven for the vampires who lived in or around Washington, D.C. V-Town was clean with very Hampton-ish with homes that had well manicured lawns, nice churches and schools that catered to the vampire community, and everything else that you would ever expect to find in the suburbs of any town in America.

V-Town was known for a lot of things but was mainly known as being the home of the Vampire Embassy, home of the government offices of the top liaisons between vampire and humans. It was in front of this grey dome-shaped building that a black limousine pulled up and came to a stop. The chauffeur exited the vehicle and walked over to the passenger side where he opened the door, allowing McDonnell to step out.

He adjusted his power tie and glanced up at the driver. "I'm not sure how long this is going to take so take a break; I will call you when I'm ready."

"Yes sir."

McDonnell walked up the steps and entered the Embassy, flashing the receptionist a welcoming smile. "Afternoon, LeeAnn."

"Afternoon, Mr. McDonnell," she greeted him with her dimpled cheeks and short brunette hair. "They have already assembled and are waiting on you."

His smile lost its luster. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He proceeded down the hallway at a cool pace until he arrived at the elevator. The door opened and he pressed the buttons for both the first and fourth floors at the same time, holding them in for five seconds. Once he released the buttons a panel on the back wall of the elevator opened up to unveil a keypad. He typed in the number 48626 and the back of the elevator slid away to reveal another hallway. He walked down it until he came to a large wooden door. He opened it and entered a massive conference room where four elderly gentlemen all sat on the same side of the table facing the lone seat on the other side that was reserved for McDonnell. Now that he had arrived all of the members of The Commission were now present.

McDonnell closed the door and took his seat, scanning the stonewalled faces of the four men in front of him as they looked at him in their sharp dark suits. From left to right sat Edison Chouinard, Gene Alvers, the big man at the table known simply as Diego, and rounded out by Hakan Trugut.

“Gentlemen,” he addressed them. They said nothing, only staring at him with their chrome colored eyes. McDonnell adjusted nervously in his seat.

“Do you know why we called this meeting?” asked Diego in his strong gruff voice.

“I believe that I have a good idea as to why.”

“How long have we been running this Commission of ours – nine hundred, a thousand years maybe?”

“Yes sir.”

Diego tapped his yellowing claws on the table. “It has lasted because people have respected the rules and stayed within the careful parameters that we have set forth. The

second that the boundaries start to be over-stepped is when problems arose and cracks formed in the foundation at which point all that we've built begins to crumble.”

“You are starting to make us doubt your appointment inside The Commission,” spoke Hakan in his heavy Middle Eastern accent. “We selected you to be the face of all vampires, placing you into a position of power as the Vice President of the United States, but you have chosen to align yourself with those that are threatening everything that we have tried so hard to do with the humans. Malachi is becoming a problem.”

“I understand that but...,”

“But nothing!” shot back Diego, silencing McDonnell with the quickness. “You have lost all control over Malachi and his group.”

“I can reign him back in.”

“We're not so sure about that,” chimed in Edison. “We think that maybe you have gotten in over your head. Our intelligence is informing us that humans are growing ever more weary and concerned about us and, needless to say, Malachi's actions are not helping.”

“What about Japan?” asked Gene, his red hair standing out against his bone pale skin.

“Did you authorize it?”

“No sir, I did not,” replied McDonnell.

“Of course you didn't. Do you remember what we told you about Malachi in the beginning?” asked Diego. “We told you that he was a loose cannon but you insisted just as you do now that you could reign him back in. You'll have to pardon us for not sharing the same level of confidence in you that you have in yourself when it comes to Malachi.”

“I understand,” answered McDonnell with the look of a scorned child. “I had tried to groom Malachi to be a successor of sorts, an apprentice to me, and for a while I believed that my efforts were actually working. He was a good soldier but his ideals are starting to get in the way of what’s best for us as a whole.”

Hakan pointed at McDonnell. “Rest assured that you are going to be held responsible for Malachi’s actions just as much as he is. He’s your attack dog and anything that he does outside of your backyard falls back on you since you are his owner. We’ve been meticulously planning our arrival and integration with humans for way too long to have one person fuck it all up. It makes no sense to continue to have conflict with humans – we have fought that battle for ages and what has it gotten us? It benefits us so much more to be at peace and carve out our little place in the world with the humans as opposed to against them.”

“Hakan is right,” piped in Edison. “We’ve been riding the sails of a relatively peaceful five years since we came forward but Malachi and his group are making some very large waves that are threatening to capsize and undermine our efforts. The unwarranted and unsanctioned attack in Kyoto was the last straw. Now we have humans looking at vampires with even more worried eyes – all the goodwill we’ve built up in the last five years has been wiped out in the blink of an eye. Humans are being killed so they retaliate by killing our children; this is the very thing that we hoped to avoid by stepping out of the shadows in the first place.”

“It’s not a secret as to what Malachi and his group are trying to do,” said Gene. “He has become disillusioned with the idea of vampires and humans together in this world and he wants things to go back to the way they used to be, back when we feasted on them

like cattle. The only way he knows to do that is to start a war between us and them, disrupting the peace and making it so we turn on each other. We have reason to believe that he has cells scattered around the world like pawns, all of them waiting his instructions to strike and cause chaos, laying the framework for a global war pitting vampires against humans.”

“It goes without saying that he must be stopped,” commented Diego. “If Malachi is allowed to continue on his path then we will have failed.”

“What do you propose I do?” asked McDonnell.

“Use the American government; it will be in their best interest as well as ours to get a handle on this situation as quickly as possible; they have the proper man and firepower to take care of it.” Diego paused for a moment as he looked across the table at McDonnell, seeing the sadness on his face. “I know how you must feel – it’s never easy to have a friend killed, but there are times when you have to cut your losses and do what’s best for the group as a whole.”

McDonnell nodded in approval. “Are you sure that the Americans are the best to use? President Black is more of a dove than a hawk.”

“We weren’t referring to her,” answered Gene. “There is someone else who is better suited for the task.”

Chapter 10

Inside the forest was quiet and peaceful. All the trees were tall and majestic, sitting like giants that had been frozen and were now patiently waiting for their time to be re-animated to wreak havoc upon the world. Perched high up near the top of one of these massive trees, concealed amongst its many leaves and branches, Michael was trying to control his emotions.

“Shhhh...,” said Strader as he knelt down on the branch next to him, listening as Michael’s breathing became heavier and more labored. “Close your eyes and try to relax.” Michael did as Strader instructed him to do. “Good, now what I need for you to do is close your mouth and breathe in deeply through your nose and out through your mouth. You need to calm yourself. Right now you’re excited and you have an abundance of adrenaline rushing through your system.”

“Like this?” asked Michael as he inhaled through his nose, already feeling the calming effects.

“Yes, precisely like that. I remember my first hunt and how excited I was right before it happened, the anticipation so high that I felt like a big ball of energy was about to explode out of me. There are things that you’re gonna have to learn, though, young Mikey. In order to become a good hunter you’ll need to be able to concentrate and become one with your surroundings. Our senses are naturally elevated, but, if you don’t know how to use them, they will be useless to you and you will be no better than humans. When you’re able to master your natural abilities you will then become truly unstoppable. I want you to close your eyes and tell me everything that you hear.”

Michael looked away from Strader and then glanced up towards the sky. The tree branches and leaves didn't allow him to see much, instead teasing him with only the slightest views of the whimsical cotton clouds in the glacier blue sky above. For the first time in a long time – since before the accident – he was actually able to relax. The air was cool, crisp, and clean against his skin and in his sinuses.

He cocked his head slightly to the left and then closed his eyes. “I can hear animals, many of them, from miles around. There are birds, raccoons, squirrels, rabbits, deer, and too many insects to mention.” The sound of the animals – plants being eaten by rabbits, raccoons communicating with each other, and the gentle pitter patter footsteps of the deer – gave him a profound sense of peace.

“Good. What else?”

His eyes opened, shifting from one side to the other. “I can smell humans; three of them.”

He heard the snap of a twig from the pressure of a foot stepping on it, the sound coming from a distance of about a mile away. A second twig broke and was followed by the unmistakable sound of a gun being fired. The animals in the forest scattered in all directions and Michael watched as startled birds took to the sky in retreat. All was quiet but then Michael clearly heard the sound of the humans running.

Strader reached over and grabbed Michael by the chin, lifting his head up. “Now is the time for your long awaited initiation, Mikey. It's time to prove yourself and make your first kill. You know what you have to do.”

Michael looked at Strader and then nodded before stepping off the branch and falling quietly to the forest floor below, landing as quietly as a feather on a bed of

marshmallows. He closed his eyes to focus better, hearing the laughs and giggles of the humans as they celebrated over the kill of what sounded like a deer to Michael.

Quickly he took off, sprinting with impossible speed towards the sound of the hunters. Squinting his eyes, he was able to see further, making out the three camouflaged humans, all of them clutching rifles. One was holding the dead deer up by the antlers, claiming his prize with a newfound sense of accomplishment. A guttural sound escaped Michaels's lips as he ran faster and faster towards them.

The three men at the kill site stopped celebrating and started listening, Michael's yell having caught their attention and sending a chill down their collective spines. "Any idea what kind of animal makes that kind of noise?" asked the hunter named Mark, his eyes wide with concern. The other two men, Johnny and Tom, glanced around as well, the thrill of their kill now the farthest thing from their minds at the moment. The yell was heard again but this time it sounded like it was coming from all around them.

"Damn it, what the hell is that?" asked Tom as he set the deer carcass on the ground and pointed his rifle dumbly around in all directions.

"I don't know what it is, but I have my friend waiting for it if it decides to show itself," exclaimed Johnny, gesturing down to his gun and letting out a carefree laugh. Tom and Mark laughed nervously with him and soon focused their attention back to the deer.

With those two preparing the animal to be hauled back to the truck Johnny stepped a few yards away to relieve himself. Down came his zipper and he peed forcefully on a tree, all the beer that he had been consuming forced his kidneys to work extra hard this morning.

As he urinated he looked up to see leaves being kicked up in the distance and the sight of a figure running towards him. He spit out the Skoal he had in his mouth as if chewing it was somehow corrupting his eyesight. By the time he realized that it was a young boy that was dashing towards him, his face was being pushed up and his body being lifted off the ground. He felt himself flying backwards as the hand continued to dig into his face, covering his eyes.

His back slammed hard up against the trunk of a tree, all the air escaping his body with the impact, his head striking the tree a split second later. Michael pulled Johnny's head forward and then savagely pushed it back again, caving it in against the unforgiving tree. Pieces of his scalp stuck to the bark as he slid down, blood dripping from his eyes and nose.

"Johnny!!" yelled out Tom, looking in the direction that his buddy had disappeared.

"Come on man, we're almost done here. Even you can't be peeing that much. Don't be over there whacking off!"

"Why don't you help me out instead of hollerin' for your boyfriend," said Mark.

"Fuck you, alright?" He gave one cautious look around and then turned to help. As Tom spun around he witnessed a blur pass by Mark as he knelt down in front of the deer. Blood suddenly shot up and Mark's head rolled to the side of his still kneeling body.

"What the fuck?" Tony said weakly as he dropped his rifle and covered his mouth, watching in horror as his friend's headless body finally fell over onto the deer. Deep down Tony knew that whatever animal that just did this had also killed Johnny. He

looked up at the trees, down at the bushes, and then performed a quick circle as he scanned the forest, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Not wanting to be the third victim, he sprinted the tenth of a mile towards the waiting truck, praying that John had left the keys in it like he normally did. Scrambling over to the driver's side door and opening it his stomach dropped to his feet like a rollercoaster at Six Flags when he saw that the keys were not in the ignition like he was hoping they would be. "SHIT!"

He walked over to the other side of the truck and looked to where Mark's body was lying and it was then that he saw Michael standing there looking back at him in the distance. In his hand he held one of the rifles.

"Boy what are you doing out here all alone?!? Get over here, quick. There's something out here that's killing folks!"

Michael held the gun up so that Tony could get a good look at it.

"There you go, bring the gun over here. That's mighty smart of you."

Michael continued his slow approach, stopping a few feet from him so that Tony couldn't get a decent view of his eyes. The gun was pointed at the ground.

"Give me the damn gun!" he yelled frantically, wiping the growing amount of perspiration from his brow as he glanced around nervously.

The blast of the gun echoed through the forest, followed by an agonizing yell from Tony. His right foot had been blown completely off and he stumbled to the ground writhing in pain. A second shot went off and his left foot disappeared, transforming into a bloody stump that mirrored his right foot.

The sight and smell of the free flowing blood brought a smile to Mikey's face. His fangs descended from his mouth as he watched the blood pool around Tony's legs. He walked up and stuck the barrel of the gun into his mouth, muffling his cries.

"Stop, Michael!" Strader glided down from the treetop and landed next to Michael, placing his right hand upon his shoulder.

Michael lowered the gun, removing it from Tony's mouth. He looked at Strader with confusion on his face. "Why did you stop me?"

"I stopped you because in order to feed you must always do it from a living body. Drinking from a deceased human can be poisonous and possibly fatal."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Tony, tears rushing down his cheeks while he spit gun powder from his mouth. "We haven't hurt any vampires."

"Maybe you haven't hurt us directly, but people like you have." He turned his attention back on Michael. "Now, you'll want to bite down right here to access the carotid artery," he told him, pressing down on his own neck to show him exactly where he needed to do it, "that's where the best blood is."

"Okay."

Tony tried to crawl away, his movement like that of a geriatric tortoise as his stumps left a gruesome trail behind him. Michael stepped up and flipped Tony over.

He tried to fight him off, flailing his arms in a last ditch effort to survive. "Stop! Let me go! Please God let me go!!"

Michael slapped him brutally across the face, silencing him. He was fascinated at the way Tony's eyelids fluttered and the way his body shook. Michael continued to stare at Tony as his mouth kept opening and closing as if he wanted to say something but the

words never made themselves heard. He dropped to his knees and then knelt over Tony's neck, his teeth sinking into it right where Strader had instructed him. He was pleasantly surprised by the warmth and amount of blood that filled his mouth.

Strader walked up and knelt down beside him. "Drink slowly. Savor it and sip; you don't want to consume too much too fast and become sick – your body has to get used to it. As you make more kills you will be able to drink more and as fast as you want."

Michael did as he was told, letting the blood trickle into his mouth instead of gushing into it like a fountain. He continued to drink for a few moments, feeling his power increasing with every drop that crossed his lips; it was as if Tony's life was being transferred into him.

"That's enough." Strader pulled him off of Tony. Michael slowly raised to his feet, licking the blood from his lips, some of it still dripping from his fangs. "How do you feel?"

"Powerful and energized."

Strader offered him a smile. "Good. You still have a bit of work to do," he said, looking down at Tony's body that was now as pale as they were, still barely clinging to life.

"How do you want me to do it?"

"Surprise me."

Michael glanced around until his eyes finally landed on what he was searching for. He walked a few yards over to where a good sized log was resting. He picked it up, his hands barely able to wrap around it, and then walked back over and stood in front of Tony.

Tony forced his eyes up at Michael, seeing the piece of wood in his hands; his glossed over eyes saying everything that his mouth couldn't. Michael swung with a stroke that would've made Hank Aaron proud, the log colliding with Tony's head with a devastating crack, demolishing his skull.

Strader eyed the destroyed man and then looked at Michael, beaming like a proud father. "My, you are a vicious one. Let's go home; you're going to need some rest."

Michael tossed the bloodied chunk of wood down upon Tony's abused body. "This was fun. When can we do this again?"

"In time son, all in due time."

Chapter 11

The two gentlemen stood silent and motionless in front of the glass wall of the room, looking on at a platoon of doctors as they converged around a single patient who wasn't able to be seen due to those hovering around him like ants spilling out of an ant hill. The gentleman on the left, Carter Dugood, wore a dark suit and methodically chewed his gum, his steel blue eyes barely blinking as he soaked in the activity going on in front of him. His partner, an older gentleman named Dr. Samuel Morris whose face was carved with the worry of a high stress, but very high paying job, shifted nervously from his left foot to his right in his white lab coat. His hair was a mess and his eyes were salmon pink from a lack of sleep.

The sound of a single set of footsteps coming down the corridor caused the both of them to turn around where they came face to face with Tina Macintosh. Whatever brought her here must have been urgent as she was without makeup and in place of her business attire she wore a pair of grey sweatpants and a red Washington Nationals shirt.

"I came as quickly as I could," she said, skipping the introductions. "How long has he been awake?"

"As soon as he regained consciousness I had you on the horn," answered the good doctor as he turned and gazed back into the room.

"What's the prognosis?"

"Very touch and go at the moment which is to be expected considering he's been in a coma for the last five years," answered Dr. Morris as he scratched his head. "It's still too early to tell if all the surgeries we performed back then have worked. I don't even know how he is alive; he was more or less broken in half."

“You would be surprised at what people can live through when they have something to live for,” spoke up Carter.

“Has he said anything since waking up?” inquired Tina.

“Only one thing,” said Dr. Morris, “he keeps repeating the name Michael over and over.”

Tina nodded her head up and down. “His son – it is believed that he is the one that did this to him and left him for dead. He disappeared and was never heard or seen from again, that was until forty-eight hours ago. His DNA and finger prints were found on three dead hunters on the outskirts of Milwaukee. Our lab also confirmed that his DNA contained clear and undisputable evidence of him having been turned.”

“Should we tell him that Michael is still alive?” asked Carter.

“Most certainly,” said Tina, “but not yet. We’ll need him to be physically ready first. He had been working on a suit to help his son walk before this happened; it’s my understanding that our people were able to pick up where he left off and finish, right Carter?”

“Affirmative, ma’am.”

“And it works?”

“Fully.”

“And the weapons I had the R&D team work on?”

“In Phase 5 of testing.”

“Good.” She placed her hand on the glass and leaned forward as the doctors continued to swarm. They briefly moved and she was able to catch a clear glimpse of

Peter and his bandage covered body, his eyes wildly darting around the room.

“Accelerate the testing. I want him suited up and walking ASAP!”

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